THE CHURCH HAS LEFT THE BUILDING:
A MODEL FOR VIRTUAL MINISTRY IN
THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

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The context is the Consolidated Baptist Church located in Lexington, Kentucky. As a result of being separated from regular in-person interaction, the membership grew apathetic toward participating in the church's virtual ministry activities. I hypothesized that if a group of leaders and laity participated as a focus group in a workshop on virtual interaction, then this group would be equipped to train others how to participate virtually at Consolidated Baptist Church. Through six weeks of focus group sessions coupled with individual checkpoint reflections and pre- and post-surveys, participants gained an increased knowledge on the impact of virtual ministry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I reflect on this journey and celebrate its completion, I can say without fear of opposition or contradiction that there is a plethora of individuals whose impact made this journey a successful one.

To the entire faculty and staff of United Theological Seminary, thank you for allowing me the space to learn and grow within the confines of this institution. I am forever indebted to you all for the opportunity to do so over the last three years.

Special acknowledgements to the Pointer, Brown, Goodman fellows, particularly the inaugural graduating class with whom I have shared this journey with. We entered as classmates, but we quickly became a family. I love you all, I thank God for you all and I am a better person and preacher because of the time we have spent and the experiences we have had together – both in and out of the classroom. This is not the end! It is just the beginning.

Special acknowledgments to our incredible Mentors, the Reverend Dr. Phillip L. Pointer Sr., the Reverend Dr. Danielle L. Brown, and the Reverend Dr. Charles E. Goodman Jr. You are three of God's greatest gifts on the planet – not just as preachers, but as people. The impact you have had on me is far too vast to adequately convey in this space and I pray I represent you well.

To my professional associates, the Reverend Dr. Joshua L. Mitchell, the Honorable Reverend Melissa Moore Murphy, and the Reverend Dr. D. Corrie Shull,

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To those who regularly speak into my life on behalf of the Lord, the Reverend Richard Gaines, the Reverend Dr. Marcus D. Cosby, and the Reverend Dr. William H. Curtis, thank you for believing in me, pouring into me, and seeing things in me that, at times, I do not see in myself. I am not who I am without the investments you have made in me.

Finally, to my family, friends and extended village, especially the Consolidated Baptist Church family who have supported me every step of the way for the entirety of my life. Thank you!

DEDICATION

To God be the glory, for the great things He has done! Without Him, none of this is possible, and I honor Him for "strengthening my hands" for the work He has called me to.

To my wife, Adrienne Marie Gaines: God knew what I needed when He gave me you. Thank you for loving me, supporting me, encouraging me, pushing me, and allowing me to be who God called me to be.

To my son, Micah Richard Gaines, II: You were not here when I initially penned these words, but you will be by the time they are published. May my ceiling by your floor.

To my parents, Reverend Richard, and Sarah Gaines: You always taught me to dream big and then to work hard to achieve whatever I had dreamed for. I pray I have made you proud in those endeavors. Thank you.

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INTRODUCTION

For over two years, Covid-19 has been a reality that faith communities have had to navigate. As a result, it has shaped the ways in which we reached those we have been called to serve. Sanctuaries were emptied, in-person worship experiences were disallowed, fellowship was reduced, intimate contact was few and far between and in many places, masks remain the order of the day. Technology ultimately became the key piece that was necessitated to effectively spread the gospel. This continues to be our plight as faith leaders, as we yet navigate a global pandemic that seemingly is here to stay for the foreseeable future. These times have forced us to be creative, innovative, and resourceful – at the risk of being left behind. One primary area in which that has been required is in digital ministry. This project is designed to illustrate the importance of pivoting in a practical way – both in an individual and congregational setting.

Upon the explanation of the synergy between my spiritual autobiography and contextual analysis, my objective was to lay foundational groundwork for an understanding of the necessity of shifting with the times. Failure to do so is to commit willful malpractice as it relates to the call and commission given to us by the Lord Jesus Christ prior to his ascension. This argument is illustrated in chapter two with an in-depth exegesis of 1 Chronicles 12:23-38 with a specialized emphasis placed on verse thirty-two, where it mentions that the sons of Issachar "understood the times" and because of this innovation, David was able to be successful in battle – all because he knew how to

utilize creativity in order to achieve victory. Without his ability to shift with changing cultures and ever-evolving seasons, he would not have gotten the positive results that he was able to garner as the leader of Israel.

Furthermore, we also discover that creativity is not a concept that is unique to David. Rather, it commences at creation for once you realize that God is both Creator and Creative, it influences the way you see the rest of the canon. For simply put, to reject creativity is to reject a sizeable portion of the majesty of God.

Following the articulation of these biblical discoveries, chapter three provides a historical framework for the necessity of creativity and pivoting throughout history. As technology began to evolve, one of the primary items that led to the furthering of creativity through technology was the invention of the phonograph. As a result of this trailblazing discovery, the road was paved for further progress later that spanned generations long after it. Groundbreaking possibilities were achieved in the areas of music, film, politics, radio and even evangelism that we still note today. All of which can trace their initial beginning back to the creation and evolution of the phonograph. Secular pivots happen faster than many would like, but to disregard them is to willfully impede progress.

Next, chapter four provides a theological focus surrounding the importance of communication. The crux of the Great Commission found at the end of Matthew chapter twenty-eight revolves around communication. Furthermore, once we understand that God has been communicating with humankind since the beginning of time from creation, we understand that to reject communication is to reject the Gospel. Consequently, the Gospel

is only the Gospel because when humanity was fallen and in need of a communicator,

God sent His Son to fulfill that role. Therein, we have the salvific work of the Gospel.

Lastly, chapter five centers around the importance of two-way communication in

a practical way when seeking to cultivate healthy and effective ways of communicating

in a congregational space when seeking to introduce the importance of digital

communication to an intergenerational audience. There are a variety of ways that this can

be accomplished. As such, chapter six consists of an overview of the research project, an

introduction of the focus group context, steps for implementation, weekly checkpoint

reflections, survey results, and data analysis.

The problem is that the average member of Consolidated Baptist Church has

grown apathetic toward participating in the church's virtual ministry activities. The

project hypothesis is if a group of leaders and laity participate in a focus group on virtual

interaction, then this group will be equipped to train others on how to participate virtually

at Consolidated Baptist Church. The anticipated outcome is that the individuals who

participate in the focus group will gain a greater understanding of the need to embrace

creativity as it relates to congregational progress, while likely understanding that failing

to do so is not an option if the end goal is forward movement as a faith community.

There was a six-week focus group that began with a pre-survey to gauge each

member's connection habits, along with their initial understanding of technology, virtual

ministry, and other key concepts relating to the project. Session one was an introductory

module that provided a high-level look on virtual connectivity and why it matters in a

congregational setting. Session two revealed a biblical precedent for creativity through

the life and ministry of various individuals. Session three shared various checkpoints in

history that were only realized because someone dared to pivot with changing times. Session four provided a theological emphasis on the concept of communication and the ways it has been embedded in the work of ministry for generations. Session five offered various solutions for creating spaces of two-way communication. Session six recapped the entire experience and culminated with a post-survey to gauge the learning of each individual who participated in the focus group.

     At the end of this focus group, the anticipated impact was the ability to gather information relating to the understanding of the average lay member as it relates to where we are headed in the areas of digital ministry and congregational connectivity. During our final session, I shared with the focus group that I was not gauging their competency as it relates to shifting technology. But rather, I was gauging the comfortability with shifting technology. My intended goal was not to generate experts, but rather to generate excitement. As a result, what I found was that at the end of our six weeks together, the overwhelming majority of the individuals who participated in the focus group concluded with a greater understanding of, appreciation for and excitement around the realities of digital ministry. This is vital simply because normal, as we once knew it, no longer exists. Shift has happened. Opportunity is knocking. It is time for us to walk through that door.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

"Time is filled with swift transition, naught of earth unmoved can stand. Build your hopes on things eternal. Hold to God's unchanging hand."[1] A notable hymn of the church, this song penned by Jennie B. Wilson in 1906 illuminates the reality that the only thing that is constant in life is change. Transition does not always provide us the privilege of preparation or the option of delaying it, but rather, it has a way of coming when we least expect it. In fact, it was Winston Churchill who once said, "To improve is to change, so to be perfect is to have changed often."[2]

Therein lies the common theme for myself and the context in which I currently reside. Both my locational residence and my ecclesiological backdrop reflect the unavoidable reality that, in the words of John C. Maxwell, "change is inevitable, but growth is optional."[3] Simply put, one of the facets of life that cannot be avoided is transition. However, a large portion of my life and ministry have been dedicated to the concept of not simply changing, but also growing. That is also the primary narrative of my context, as for almost 138 years, they have not only changed, but grown. Located in

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[1] Jennie B. Wilson, "Hold to God's Unchanging Hand," The National Baptist Hymnal (Nashville, TN: R. H. Boyd Publishing, n.d.), 248.

[2] Richard M. Langworth, *Churchill by Himself: The Life, Times, and Opinions of Winston Churchill in His Own Words* (London, UK: Ebury Press, 2008), 50.

[3] John C. Maxwell, *The Fifteen Invaluable Laws of Growth: Live Them and Reach Your Potential* (New York, NY: Center Street, 2014), 41.

Lexington, Kentucky, the Consolidated Baptist Church is where I presently serve and have served for most of my life. As its name suggests, consolidated is the product of a merger. In 1884, the Rose Street Baptist Church was founded, and Reverend Alford Britten was its first pastor. In 1891, Macedonia Baptist Church purchased property in the same vicinity as Rose Street Baptist Church; and in 1895, the congregations of Rose Street Baptist and Macedonia Baptist agreed to merge.

With the merger of the two churches, the congregation decided on the name Consolidated Baptist Church to symbolize their union. Reverend Joseph Hopewell, who was then pastor of Rose Street Baptist Church, served as the first pastor of this newly formed congregation. Following the merger of the two congregations, Consolidated Baptist Church held services on East Winslow Street in the building previously used by Macedonia Baptist Church. However, after renting the property for many years, Consolidated Baptist Church purchased the building in 1908.

In 1922, the East Winslow Street property was sold to Kentucky State College (now the University of Kentucky), and property on South Upper Street was purchased. Immediately after land was purchased, Consolidated Baptist Church began construction of the lower level. The congregation met and held services at various locations around the city. When the basement was completed, services were held there; and in 1927, Reverend Carey Scott and the congregation were finally able to worship in the new sanctuary. Thanks to the dedication of many members during the leadership of Reverend William Howard, the mortgage on the building was burned in 1945. Following the death of Reverend Howard, Reverend Henry Wise Jones served as pastor until later relocating to

Cincinnati, Ohio. Upon his departure, Reverend Reginald Van Stephens became the new pastor in 1986.

In 1987, Reverend Reginald Van Stephens established the Great Faith Fund to provide funding for a new facility for worship and study. As a testament to God's faithfulness, Pastor Stephens' dedication, and the congregation's commitment, God blessed Consolidated in 1989 with more than twelve acres of land that were purchased from the University of Kentucky. On May 6, 1996, Consolidated Baptist Church voted to elect Reverend Richard Gaines as their new Senior Pastor. Under his tutelage, the membership expanded from 200 members to nearly 2,000 members.

After many years of praying and seeking God's guidance, Consolidated Baptist Church moved into a new worship center at 1625 Russell Cave Road in 2003, under the leadership of Reverend Richard Gaines. In 2008, a third Sunday morning service and several other ministries were added. In 2009, the facilities were expanded to include additional offices, classrooms, a fully functional family life center, gymnasium, fitness center, walking track, full-service kitchen, and youth wing. With these additional resources, we have more ways to reach and transform our neighborhood, the greater Lexington community, and the world.

Utilizing the mantra of "Building God's Kingdom, Building God's People," Consolidated Baptist Church strives to be radically hospitable, socially conscious, and purposefully intergenerational in the ways we do ministry. This is reflected through the intentionally liturgical planning and execution of our weekly worship experiences and weekly Bible studies, along with other discipleship elements offered throughout the week. As times continue to change and culture continues to shift, our goal as a twenty-

first-century church is to remain proactive and progressive as we seek to creatively reach

an intergenerational congregation that represents the entire greater Lexington community.

It is a growing community, and though having proven transient at times, it is a segment

that has brought a lot of vision and innovation to both the city of Lexington and the local

church known as Consolidated Baptist Church.

While some first encounter their context later in life, my reality is such that I have

been a part of my context for twenty-six of my twenty-seven years of life. I was just shy

of two years old when we arrived at Consolidated Baptist Church, and it was there that I

was first thrust into the rite of passage otherwise known as Children's Ministry. Being the

son of the pastor, it was all but assumed that I was going to be involved in just about

anything I could get my hands on. For most of my adolescence, this was exactly the case

simply because my father and I were inseparable. While my friends were at birthday

parties, I was at revival. While they were away at summer camp, I was hopping from

convention to convention, unsure of what any of them exactly meant—but knowing full

well that I was enjoying the experiences along the way. Nonetheless, I was exposed to

preaching, preachers, and the Lord's church at a very early age.

That reality accompanied a premature assumption both from members of our

congregation and other members of my father's peer circle that I would preach one day. I

was not a major fan of that possibility, but it was early, and I was a kid, so I did not think

too much of it. I just wanted to be a kid, and as most church kids, I enjoyed music,

without fail.

Around the age of six, I began my musical journey playing both the drums and

keyboards. It was through this reality that I got my initial introduction to the hymns of the

church. Being the precociously contemporary child that I was, I always wanted to learn whatever our choir was singing or the hottest song on the radio at the time. It was instilled in me then the importance of knowing both the melodies and the theological lyricism that created the hymns upon which we stand even in 2020. It was this foundation that provided the catalyst for my public ministry in the field of music. Shortly thereafter, I became the drummer for our children's choir and enjoyed the love and support of our congregation that came along with it.

From these moments, I was exposed to the inner working of church and music ministry from a young age. Just like any church kid, I was never really given the option of what I was going to participate in. Nonetheless, there was a genuine love for the local church that was nurtured in me literally from my early moments there. Various women such as the late Sis. Jessica Stephens Bryant, Sis. Angelene Moore, Sis. Lolita Brown, Sis. Virgie Demeritte, Sis. Geneva Hunter, and others fostered my precocious passion for the things of God and God's word and allowed me to be the overzealous child I was without completely quenching my thirst for knowledge. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

> The more we learn to allow others to speak the Word to us, to accept humbly and gratefully even severe reproaches and admonitions, the more free and objective will we be in speaking ourselves. The person whose touchiness and vanity make him spurn a brother's earnest censure cannot speak the truth in humility to others; he is afraid of being rebuffed and of feeling that he has been aggravated. The touchy person will always become a flatterer and very soon will come to despise and slander his brother. But the humble person will stick both to truth and to love. He will stick to the Word of God and let it lead him to his brother. Because he seeks nothing for himself and has no fears for himself, he can help his brother through the Word.[4]

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[4] Dietrich Bonhoeffer et al., *Life Together* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 106-107.

Looking back, there were likely several experiences that I had ahead of schedule, but because of these women's love and discernment, they were kind enough to allow me to blaze my own trail as my curiosity led me into various spaces that were almost assuredly beyond the scope of my years. However, it was also in those early moments that I came face to face with the first point of connection between who I was and where I was— diversity, or a lack thereof.

Per Data USA, demographically, 323,780 residents make up the city of Lexington. Between 2017 and 2018, the population of Lexington-Fayette, Kentucky grew from 321,959 to 323,780—a 0.566% increase—and its median household income declined from $56,137 to $54,896—a 2.21% decrease. The population of Lexington-Fayette is 70.6% White, 14.5% African American, and 7.42% Hispanic; 93.2% are U.S. citizens.[5]

In short, the city of Lexington is by no means a national leader in diversity—be it population, race, ethnicity, or any other measure. As such, that unavoidable reality was greatly reflected in the environment in which I matriculated through both education and adolescence. It is said that "Genuine spiritual authority is to be found only in spaces where the ministry, helping, bearing and proclaiming is carried out."[6] In my early life, I could not yet fully comprehend what exactly that space looked like fully fleshed out. However, little did I know that I was about to learn firsthand much sooner than I expected.

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[5] Data USA, "Lexington-Fayette, KY," Data USA, 2018, https://datausa.io/profile/geo/lexington-fayette-ky.

[6] Bonhoeffer et al., *Life Together*, 108.

At the age of four, and as a consequence of a late birthday hindering my admittance into public school, I began formal education at Lexington Christian Academy, a notable institution in our city that touted their ability to provide "education with eternity in view." I began there in kindergarten as the only African American in my class, which would become a common theme for the duration of my time at Lexington Christian Academy (LCA). From the outset, it did not seem to be too much of an issue; kids are kids, right?

Though my transition was fairly smooth, it became clear to me very early that I was different than the other kids around me—not just racially, but also psychologically. I did not fully understand it as a child, but I understood enough to know there was a major difference. I assimilated well into the dominant culture of LCA as an elementary school student, excelling in all my courses and ascending to the top of my classes each year. However, as the years passed, I kept noticing more and more that I was just different. I kept noticing that I was still one of, if not the only African American in most of my classes. The only other African Americans that were mentioned in course content or class discussions were either the ones bouncing a basketball or the ones living in third-world countries that we sponsored as our annual "mission project." At that point in time, I was not really being treated any differently though, so I just did my best to shrug it off as I matriculated through my elementary school years. My grades were great, I was winning awards, my teachers seemed to like me, and I felt like I had solid friends, so I did not want to unnecessarily rock the boat in any way that would adversely affect any of those realities.

Things started to get a little rocky in 2007. It was then that I advanced from elementary school and began what was known as junior high. Being that I was remaining at LCA, all that really shifted in my mind was a change in campuses, but for those around me, it might as well have been the start of a completely different paradigm. This ended up being the first time I saw the ugly side of race and became aware that I was a Black boy in a White space. The years of seventh and eighth grade were 2007-2008, and they were two of the roughest years I had faced to that point.

Various friendships that I had nurtured from kindergarten through sixth grade either stalled or severed; teachers began to look at me closer than ever, and I became more acclimated with the term "Oreo" than I cared to be. For the sake of clarity, an "Oreo" is defined in current culture as one who is Black on the outside and White on the inside; and unfortunately for most of my peers, that is how I was seen from their lens. As such, the fact that I could not shoot a basketball or run a football, know how to rap, or come from a broken family meant that I did not fit their image of Blackness. I received more comments than I can even count cloaked in inherent bias centered around the fact that I could not have been Black, because the way I acted did not line up with how I was supposed to act. Furthermore, these comments did not just come from peers, but rather, they came from teachers as well. The more I excelled in the classroom, the more I noticed that my intelligence was beginning to be policed by those whose job it was to ensure that I excelled. It also bothered me that all of this was occurring within the four walls of the "Christian" school that loved sending groups overseas to do missions to Black and Brown people to massage their personal conscious, while deliberately ignoring the very Black and Brown people that were in their own space.

It was this contextual backdrop that allowed this point of congruency to come alive between who I am and where I am, for even though I am several years removed from those experiences, not much has changed in our immediate context. For though racism might not be as overt in Lexington as it is in certain other places across the country, there is the still the presence of covert racism and implicit biases that have an adverse impact on how things take place in various everyday realities—particularly in education. For the 2016-2017 academic year, Fayette County Public School reported that African American students were four point five times more likely to be suspended than their White peers. That disparity has since decreased to only two point six times.[7]

The commonality demonstrated is that whether the point of reference is my grade school education or the current climate for the like, the fact remains that Black and Brown children still must thrive in a space that is not built for them to succeed. Far too often, their intelligence is policed, their curiosity is limited, and their window for making mistakes is far narrower than it is for their White counterparts. Consequently, it has led many at the table where change happens to ask the question of what can be done to dispel this inequitable disparity. It can easily be stated that there is an issue with things as they currently stand, but the challenge lies in ensuring that qualitative reform is executed with both excellence and efficiency. Any other action plan leaves our students underrepresented and without the adequate support they need to be successful.

The second important point of congruency between myself and the context is in a consistent commitment to the faithful, substantive preaching of the gospel. Dr. Katie

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[7] Valarie Honeycutt Spears, "Black Students Are Punished Twice as Often as White Students in Lexington Schools," *Lexington Herald Leader*, October 29, 2017, https://www.kentucky.com/news/local/education/article181582496.html.

Geneva Cannon defines the proclamation of the gospel as "holy stuff being delivered to needy people for the purpose of feeding hungry souls the manna most satisfying."[8] It is through this divine exercise that souls are saved, lives are changed, and realities are transformed. With that, it is important to note that effectiveness of preaching requires a keen awareness of not just the "what" of preaching, but also the "who" of preaching. In other words, both community and context matter as well. Dr. H. Beecher Hicks states, "Sound preaching is never achieved in isolation. It must be understood and evaluated in the context of living worship. This means that the preacher must also be concerned about the setting in which preaching takes place."[9]

It is this realization that illuminates the reality that the call to preach is not to be taken lightly or entered haphazardly; but rather, it is calling that should be handled with the utmost respect, reverence, and integrity. That is precisely why upon that discovery, I did not want to preach. For most of my life, I heard people—both clergy and laity alike—say that I was going to preach one day. For many, this came as the result of observing my mannerisms in church, admiring my love for the church, and appreciating the depth of the relationship I shared with my father. However, as much as I had grown up around preachers and preaching, I honestly had no desire to preach. That may sound like the normal cliché answer that preachers give when this subject arises, but I can share without fear of opposition or contradiction that I genuinely had no desire to preach for a plethora of reasons.

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[8] Katie G. Cannon, *Teaching Preaching: Isaac Rufus Clark and Black Sacred Rhetoric* (London, UK: Continuum, 2007), 46.

[9] H. Beecher Hicks, *Preaching Through a Storm* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1987), 69.

For one, I had seen the weight that preachers and pastors bore for most of my life. I saw the way people dealt with them, the way their congregations had taken them for granted and, in many cases, mistreated them. I witnessed the emotional toll it took on many of them, and I did not want that to be my life's reality. Even deeper than that, I had no desire to be a preacher because I saw what it had done to their marriages and their families. Frankly, even today, I cannot think of even four or five holistically healthy and authentically happy ministry marriages that I saw growing up. Rather, it seemed like all the couples in my immediate vicinity either could not stand each other in private while faking the funk in public, or they did not care enough to be fake in public and everyone on the outside simply knew there was trouble in paradise. This was the case for most of the couples I had seen to the point where I promised myself that if the cost of a ministry call was going to be a subpar home life, then it simply was not worth it for me. I was determined to hold fast to my commitment, to stay in music, and far away from preaching.

That only got me so far though. That summer was the first time I had definitively heard God's voice as it related to a call to preach. For the reasons listed previously as well as a few others, I fervently resisted. I was comfortable behind the drums, content on the organ, and did not desire another reality. I was confident to serve where I was and did not feel the need to make any shifts in my lifestyle, cadence, or routine.

Not to mention, I did not feel like hearing the chatter that I was only preaching because of my father. I did not need or want that, so I figured the best way to avoid any inkling of that was to run in the completely opposite direction, and that is what I did. The only compromise I made with God was for him to make this so plain that I literally could

not miss it. If God was willing to do that, I would consider giving God a yes, naïve, I know. However, I was convinced that that position would sustain me for the time being, and for a while, it surprisingly did. The only problem, though, was that God kept providing more signs.

The day I finally told my father that I sensed what God calling me to preach was a fall afternoon in October, and we met at Raising Cane's on the campus of the University of Kentucky. I will never forget it as long as I live, partially because the site of that particular Raising Cane's was actually the former site of our previous worship location as a church. As such, that space had a very rich meaning to the both of us. For what seemed like an indeterminable amount of time, I shared everything that God had shared with me, along with everything I had been processing for the months prior. My father just listened and listened—he is one of the best I know at that quality—and when I finally got to the end, all he said was, "I've been waiting for this conversation."

That, alone, was the confirmatory, peaceful release that I needed to go forth. He and I talked in October 2012; I announced my calling on New Year's Day and preached my initial sermon on August 31, 2013. Almost immediately thereafter, I was basically thrust into the throes of ministry by fire. I did not receive the luxury of a long runway to get adjusted, nor did I really want one for that matter. Rather, it was literally full speed ahead from the word "Go."

Almost seven years later, I now serve at Consolidated Baptist Church as the pastor of worship and am in full cognizance of the history it has had as a congregation with strong, substantive preaching. For having only five senior pastors over the last 100 years, Consolidated Baptist Church possesses a rich history of tenured leaders who

maintained a commitment to the gospel. This was evident in their consistency not only in

both preparation and proclamation, but also in their maintaining of regular devotional

time for their personal development. Peter Scazzero says:

> As Christian leaders, one of our greatest challenges is to manage ourselves. How
> can I be in communion with other people if I am not in communion with myself?
> How can I be in a healthy relationship with others if I am not in a healthy
> relationship with myself? How can I be intimate with you if I am not intimate
> with myself?[10]

Over the 138-year history of Consolidated Baptist Church, much has shifted. Several

things have drastically changed; however, one thing that has remained the same is the

faithfulness, integrity, and willingness of the senior pastor to ensure that every single

week, they opened the scriptures and shared accurately what God had to say through His

word. There were eras in which the preaching moment was solely exposition. There were

eras in which the preaching moment was a time of civil demonstration, as they navigated

the climate of civil rights and plunged through the ebbs and flows of integration

alongside the likes of native Lexingtonians such as Dr. William Augustus Jones. There

were instances where the preaching moment was a time of necessary celebration, for in

hearing and understanding what is preached from the pulpit, every now and then there

should be a vocal response from the pew. Dr. Frank Thomas says:

> Within the tradition of celebrative design, the goal of the African American
> sermon is to help people experience the assurance of grace that is the gospel. But
> this goal can never be achieved if the good news is established as an intellectual
> and philosophical abstraction separated from the experience (senses) of the
> people. Although the assurance of grace has a theological, philosophical, and
> metaphysical base, for the African American preacher that assurance must be
> grounded in the senses and experiences of the people. The assurance of grace
> must be seen, tasted, heard, felt and touched. The good news must register in the
> body, thinking and emotions of the preacher and people. Celebrative design

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[10] Peter Scazzero and Warren Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 208.

clearly rests on the belief that concrete and intimate evil requires concrete and intimate encounter with the good news.[11]

It is with this backdrop in mind that the clergymen who have served the Consolidated Baptist Church entered the preaching moment. As a result of that reality, that they produced a congregation that had and still has a strong appetite for the word of God and to see it applied to each facet of life.

The third point of congruence between who I am and where I am is in the area of transition. One constant source of change during the last seven years of my life has been transition. Having graduated from the University of Kentucky in 2016, I spent the following academic year in Birmingham, Alabama before relocating to Richmond, Virginia to continue my academic journey at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University. Upon completion, I came back to Lexington to join the staff at Consolidated Baptist Church. I arrived on the heels of serving in three completely different churches in three completely different states in three completely different regions. However, two of the three shared a unique reality: their current senior pastors were there because of a successfully executed transition plan. William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird say:

> It seems odd that so many pastors give strong leadership in so many strategic areas but stop leading when it comes to succession issues. Why? We think it's because are so few models. It's just not the norm – yet! Pastors and church leadership teams simply don't think that way, although a few are beginning to.[12]

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[11] Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praising God* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 45.

[12] William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird, *Next: Pastoral Succession that Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 27.

It was through these experiences that I realized that transiency does not just affect the church's membership, but it can also affect its leadership. Having spent time in Birmingham, Alabama at New Rising Star Missionary Baptist Church, in Houston, Texas at Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, and in Richmond, Virginia at Union Branch Baptist Church, it became clear to me that one consistency between those areas and even my home base in Lexington, Kentucky was transition. In every outside space except Union Branch, the senior pastor was the beneficiary of a well thought-out and precisely executed transition plan that ensured that as one leader stepped off the scene, there was another leader right there to take hold of the baton to ensure that ministry continued at a high level, even amidst transition.

To be sure, this required a great deal of preparation on the part of the outgoing leader, both in administration and in preaching. While residing in Birmingham, Alabama, I served at the New Rising Star Missionary Baptist Church under the leadership of Dr. F. Thomas Beavers, who succeeded his now-late grandfather, Dr. Tommy C. Chappell. They have both shared extensive details with me about the amount of time, energy, and discernment it took to facilitate their transition from a perspective that ensured cohesion and synergy between both leaders and laity alike; but that requires not only knowledge, but also vision. William Easum says:

> Vision is an overused and underestimated concept. Too often it is portrayed as a bigger-than-life idea that changes as the situation changes. For many, vision is synonymous with strategy. Others see vision as little more than motivating others to do what one wants them to do. Vision should be reserved for much more. Vision comes out of a person's deep belief in what God is doing in this world. Vision possesses every fiber of a person's being (to the point where) you don't have a choice except to follow the path of the vision.[13]

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[13] William M. Easum, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers: Ministry Anytime, Anywhere, by Anybody* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 79.

Vision is a concept that puts legs onto strategy, thus increasing the chance of the successful execution of its contents. In an ecclesiological context, I believe that vision and cohesion are key elements for navigating transition in the life of a local church. That comes into play here yet again because in this present moment, we remain amid a major transition as a congregation – not between a former pastor and a new pastor. But rather, we are continuing to navigate the transition into a virtual context.

In March 2020, like many other congregations nationwide, our in-person worship experiences came to a screeching halt due to the realities of Covid-19. As such, I assumed responsibility for creating, producing, and overseeing our weekly online platform – CBC: Unplugged, and I have successfully facilitated the intricate transition of our worship and discipleship from in-person experiences to an all-digital format that we offer each week through our website, Facebook Live, Instagram Live, Zoom, YouTube and Roku. This has provided us with an incredible opportunity to continue equipping and ministering to our entire congregation, even in absentia. Additionally, the inclusion and expansion of these online platforms has allowed us to reach many more people than we would typically see in-person. Moreover, it has taught us that the hybrid model of reaching our audience is here to stay.

For many, the idea of virtual worship has been a nuisance and bothersome, simply because we have grown accustomed to gathering in the sanctuary at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning to celebrate the goodness of God for who God is and thank God for what God has done. As such, to suggest that we do those things without gathering

physically seems like an incomplete or an inadequate way of fulfilling the command of "Let everything that hath breath, praise the Lord!" (Ps. 150:6).[14]

To others, though, the idea of virtual worship has been a welcome addition. It allows them to wake up on Sunday morning, prepare a cup of their favorite starter beverage, make breakfast, get situated on the couch and enjoy their local church from the comfort of the couch or bedroom. It has placed convenience at the top of the menu and allowed the experience of worship to occur in its full totality without having to even leave the house. For many, this idea of comfortable Christianity has become the norm to the point where there is not even an immediate interest in returning to in-person worship in physical space.

Some would argue that there is a theological tilt that can be leveraged in favor of in-person gatherings. For while we are instructed to "consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching," (Heb. 10:24-25). Many would surmise that that this command cannot be adequately carried out in virtual spaces. However, there are others who would argue that while that text is true and authoritative as divinely inspired biblical text, in this time of uncertain health crisis, there is a significant health concern that must be considered as well for the safety of those that we have been called to serve. To ignore it is to willingly be ignorant to the risks that we are facing as a country and as a faith community.

As many churches wrestle with whether to remain virtual or maintain with in-person worship experiences, the fact remains – virtual worship experiences are here to

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[14] Biblical citations are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted, Psalm 150:6.

stay for the foreseeable future. To refuse to engage the technology that allows them to be executed in an excellent way is to say, "I'm not interested in pivoting my church into the digital age." I would submit that no congregation would conscientiously make that declaration in 2022, so this shift must be addressed head on as we seek to be effective carriers of the gospel – even in the seemingly unending age of Covid-19. That is where Consolidated Baptist Church finds herself in this time.

As we embark upon the third year of this global pandemic, Consolidated Baptist Church is still seeking to find new and innovative ways to engage on congregants through our online campus – CBC: Unplugged. The reality is that even though virtual ministry has expanded our reach in both worship and discipleship, many of those we minister to have grown tired of virtual offerings.

We currently offer Sunday worship at 11:00 a.m., along with Bible studies at noon and at 7:00 p.m. on Wednesday. As with anything else, numbers were promising when we first began as members saw the reality of something new and creative as an opportunity to jump on the digital bandwagon. However, as the months began to pass and months turned into years, many began to experience digital burnout and grow weary of having to withstand more screen time. As a result, their commitment to participate began to wane.

To be sure, I understand this struggle as it is one that I have experienced myself over the last several years while dealing with the realities of various responsibilities that yet continue even as we live through a global pandemic. However, the fact remains that virtual connectivity is not going anywhere, even in our faith communities. As we continue to live in a continual state of transition, there must be an intentional effort taken

to reinvigorate the leaders and laity of Consolidated Baptist Church in the virtual options

that have been provided to participate in the weekly worship and discipleship efforts of

this local fellowship. Transition may be difficult, but it is certainly not impossible.

      To that end, I hypothesize that if a group of leaders and laity participate as a focus

group in a workshop on virtual interaction, then this group will be equipped to train

others on how to participate virtually at Consolidated Baptist Church.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Innovation and genius are not foreign to scripture. Innovation is neither simply a construct of the academy. As a matter of fact, what is true and present in scripture should be simultaneously appreciated within the surrounding physical world. When scholars at Christ-centered institutions are called to perform biblical integration, they are fundamentally called to find the connections that exist between their respective disciplines and the greater realm of knowledge and truth—especially as found in Holy scriptures.[1] Finding those connections must not simply serve one group but must seek to serve multiple groups.

Old Testament scripture is full of examples of innovators whose work blessed generations beyond them. God gives Noah instructions to make an ark of gopherwood so that the length of the ark was three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits and its height thirty cubits. He made a window for the ark and finished it to a cubit from above and set the door of the ark in its side. He made it with lower, second, and third decks (Gn. 6:14-16). This massive innovation was no small feat. It ultimately preserved the family of Noah and the two-by-two creation. Noah's innovation and obedience would be a blessing to future generations.

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[1] Timothy R. Tuinsta, "God and the Engineer: An Integration Paper," Cedarville University, January 2012, https://www.cedarville.edu/~/media/Files/PDF/Center-for-Biblical-Integration/Faculty-Integration-Paper-Tim-Tuinstra-Engineering.pdf.

One finds innovation at the hands of Jacob as well. Genesis chapter thirty tells of Jacob's work to breed a different type of sheep. This process of innovation eventually leads to Jacob's freedom. As a result of his work, Jacob become a prosperous man. In addition to his prosperity, he helps to lead the nation of Israel. His influence brings together generations of Israelites. One must even consider Solomon among those who pioneered efforts in the Old Testament. In great and very elaborate detail, what Solomon completes with the temple is remarkable. For all of chapters six and seven of 1 Kings, Solomon's instruction to those who assist him embraces new technologies and the people take no shortcuts in its completion.

This characteristic certainly is neither foreign to the modern world. Examining these characteristics through the example of God and at least one of the patriarchs of Israel's history is necessary to arrive at a proper interpretation of 1 Chronicles 12:23-38. Examining innovation and genius through the lens of God, as the ultimate innovator, provides a proper view of the need for innovation in the Old Testament church and now the New Testament church. After providing a proper understanding on the ultimate innovator, one can see how those who are intentional about their obedience to God follow in the footsteps of the Father of innovation.

Perhaps, viewing God as the ultimate innovator is the beginning of an overall understanding. God so sovereignly chooses to create under no obligation because God is in the beginning. Likewise, God fails to depend on anything else for existence. Aquinas held that God created ex nihilo (out of nothing), with no preconditions or constraints.[2] Using creator and innovator synonymously, it is clear to see how one appropriately

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[2] Cynthia Crysdale and Neil Ormerod, "Creator God," *Sewanee Theological Review* 58, no. 2 (2015): 301-306, https://theology.sewanee.edu/media/sewanee-theological-review/.

assigns this characteristic to the nature of God. As the one who so ingeniously and strategically designed the world, innovator is a proper characteristic. In Genesis 1:1-31, one finds the creation story and God taking embedded intergenerational approach to creation. what occurred during the creation of the world that would speak to an intergenerational approach to the world the scripture fails to explicitly articulate, but eventually scripture details how God is intentional and concerned about intergenerationality.

In God's creation, each creation account details each day's innovation and progression, and this work would eventually serve several generations simultaneously. Days one through six see the creation of the earth and nature that will exist upon the earth. From night-to-day, land-to-sea, crop-to-creature (animal), innovation happens in the world. These realities serve a purpose that ultimately glorifies God. Even the day of rest implemented by the Father is a form of innovation to early creation. After six days of genius activity, there is a day to rest as there will be more to accomplish in creation.

Still, God desired fellowship beyond this part of creation and God pivots to another form of God's creation. To be clear, no creature can assert a right to existence independent of God; each can only receive the unmerited gift of being.[3] To accomplish that, then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness…So God created man in [God's] own image; in the image of God [God] created him; male and female [God] created them" (Gn. 1:26). This served the immediate fellowship God desired with creation and God also put in place the ability for this man and woman to create intergenerational spaces in creation. Then God blessed them, and God said to

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[3] Paul D. Jones, "The Patience of God the Creator: Reflections of Genesis 1:1-2:4a," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 4 (2019): 362, doi:10.1111/ijst.12386.

them, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it…" (Gn. 1:28). This intentionality from God speaks to several things, but two things very clearly: not only is God passionate about innovation, but God is passionate about intergenerational innovation. All of creation was set to glorify God and serve one another; that intergenerational service to one another was set in stone by the command to "be fruitful and multiply."

When one considers the church today and how the intentional work of the church will impact future generations, that consideration must begin with the genius of God and God's intentional nature to form a creation that would continue to progress and create generations that would be progress as well. God intended for them to be innovative and intentional and that was to be to God's glory. As one understands God in this way, one can understand and appreciate the work of the sons of Issachar as well. With the example of pivot God takes in creation through Adam and Eve, the first of human creation, David's desire for the help of those who could intentionally and progressively assist him is imperative to highlight when considering how the generations of humanity would continue to evolve, connect, and interact with one another. The intentionality of God is a necessary and perfect example for the church of today to follow if it is to reach all generations in a very new space.

Pivoting is not a foreign concept to scripture. In fact, David must make a very conscious pivot from the leadership that once existed with Saul. Evidently, the Chronicler provides an account of David's reign that is quite alternative to the more familiar one in the books of Samuel.[4] David spends some of the last days of Saul in flight from Saul and

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[4] Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 412.

Saul seeks his life. Though David faces opposition by some, once he becomes king of Israel, his leadership makes a positive difference in the life of Israel. Israel could easily be destroyed or simply absorbed among the many peoples that formed the melting pot of Palestine. Extraordinary leadership that David and his son Solomon provides leads to a remarkable transformation of Israel's fortunes.[5]

David's public leadership as a self-less king sets Israel up to be a dominant state. After the death of Saul, Israel faces several challenges including the threat to their security—the Philistines. The looming threat of the Philistines needs eradication and God so divinely sets things in motion for this, which includes David's ascension to king of Israel. Consequently, many advancements come to Israel under David's leadership. He is now the untroubled, unchallenged ruler and carrier of YHWH's eternal promises to dynasty and to community.[6]

Still, David achieves this not in isolation. His ability to bring together quarreling groups into one consolidated and unified whole is no small feat. To preserve the longevity of these peoples, David needs to solicit the assistance of those who can support him and work in a progressive manner. David faces a delicate and difficult task upon assuming the kingship of all Israel. Somehow, he solidifies a base of support among the contentious tribes, gaining their loyalties while abstaining from every appearance of tribal favoritism.[7] The sovereignty of God and the work of the people proves to strengthen Israel during David's reign and bless generations to follow.

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[5] Holman Reference Staff and Thomas V. Brisco, eds., *The Holman Bible Atlas: A Complete Guide to the Expansive Geography of Biblical History* (Nashville, TN: B and H Publishing Group, 1998), 102.

[6] Brueggemann and Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 412.

[7] Holman Reference Staff and Brisco, *The Holman Bible Atlas*, 103.

First Chronicles begins with a very long, holy genealogy that tracks history from Adam to David and sees the divine promise pass through those generations.[8] David is intentional about developing the men who will ultimately support him in his kingship. With its lengthy genealogy, it is additionally important to note that Chronicles is not a manifesto devoted to a specific political movement but a more general and comprehensive theological stock-taking, striving to achieve a new religious balance in the face of a changing world.[9] David not only surrounds himself with men who would assist him with the work of his kingship, but David also contributes to their ability to do the work needed for Israel's future. David has mighty men who strengthen themselves with him in his kingdom with all Israel, to make him king, according to the word of the Lord concerning Israel (1 Chr. 11:10). The investment that David makes in these men sets up the investment that these men will make in the kingdom and for future generations. This is certainly an intergenerational investment for Israel. The genealogy proves how the choice of these men affects the current and coming generations under David's reign.

This holy genealogy includes the sons of Jacob and Issachar. One can trace what is known about Issachar back to the book of Genesis where it records his birth (Gen. 30:18). Mentions of Issachar and the tribe of Issachar continue through Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Kings, to the book this work highlights—1 Chronicles—and on to two more books within scripture. Moses in his final blessing to Israel blesses the lineage of Issachar and Issachar is allotted land in the very fertile Jezreel valley. The land of Issachar extended mostly from the highlands north of Jezreel

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[8] Andrew E. Arterbury, W. H. Bellinger Jr., and Derek S. Dodson, *Engaging the Christian Scriptures: An Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 97.

[9] Sara Japhet, *I and II Chronicles* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 1431.

to Mount Tabor in the north and the Jordan River in the east.[10] This tribe had experience

prior to 1 Chronicles for knowing where they were, when they were and what to do as

this land was fertile and simultaneously could be worked.

Considering the survival of the tribe of Issachar prior to what 1 Chronicles

chapter twelve and beyond would reveal is critical. After the blessing of Moses, the tribe

of Issachar is allotted land in the Jezreel Valley. One source notes that "The agricultural

heartland of the country; it is an area rich in natural springs…Aside from its agricultural

significance the Jezreel Valley was an important thoroughfare even in ancient times as it

presented an easy route from the ocean in the west to the mountains east of the Jordan

River and to Egypt."[11] This area, inhabited by the tribe of Issachar, was certainly ready

for agriculture but the impact of the land and the consistent threat of the Canaanites

would stifle the tribe. Berlin notes that "It seems that the valley areas of Issachar were not

conquered by the tribe until a later period, since the Canaanites with their chariots were

too difficult to defeat for a long time."[12]

Times begin to get better for Israel as David assumes kingship. Brisco notes that

"Extraordinary leadership provided by David and his son Solomon led to a remarkable

transformation of Israel's fortunes."[13] Still once again, Israel fails to achieve this with

only help from David. In fact, "He is never a lone hero or isolated king but is always

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[10] Adele Berlin, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 79.

[11] Gems in Israel, "Geography of Israel: The Jezreel Valley," Jewish Virtual Library, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-jezreel-valley.

[12] Berlin, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 86.

[13] Holman Reference Staff and Brisco, *The Holman Bible Atlas*, 103.

surrounded by a company."[14] David is wise enough to surround himself with those who

could help him lead Israel. In particular, not only the threat of outside forces challenges

the nation of Israel, but internal issues surface because of David's new role. David faces a

delicate and difficult task upon assuming the kingship of all Israel. Somehow, he needs to

solidify a base of support among the contentious tribes, gaining their loyalties while

abstaining from every appearance of tribal favoritism.[15] What is clear is that as anointed

as David is, God is even more intentional about David's success. God fails to simply

throw David amid Israel without consideration for the work ahead of him and the nation.

According to 1 Chronicles 12:32, 200 chiefs were a part of Issachar's tribe. The

people are present and leadership within in still necessary. The people are present but the

story of David's successes as king only happens with those within the tribe who are

willing *and* able. David requires more than just bodies that occupy space to move Israel

forward. If Israel is to continue what was so generously started in them, God needs to

position them, and they need to be with those who could think beyond simply the current

context. What these thinkers and innovators contribute to Israel is not simply for the

generation of that day, but to the benefit of all of Israel and beyond those generations

present in 1 Chronicles.

Brisco notes that "The legitimate leaders are always in the right place at the right

time. That view also applies to the leaders of the people after the restoration."[16] Of the

tribe of Issachar, the sons of Issachar come to the forefront in 1 Chronicles chapter

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[14] Peter J. Leithart, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019), 657.

[15] Holman Reference Staff and Brisco, *The Holman Bible Atlas*, 104.

[16] Arterbury, Bellinger, and Dodson, *Engaging the Christian Scriptures*, 97.

twelve. This work's acknowledgment begins in verse twenty-three of the chapter. By the time of chapter twelve, David is King, and the sons of Issachar are lauded for their "understanding of the times." So many facets to this exist and they must be explored. As explained, it creates a level of understanding on how creative, resourceful, and innovative congregations or local nations are to prevent from being left behind amid critical pivots and shifts in this lifetime.

To begin, Israel came out of the wilderness and are now able to progress. Israel moves from wandering to working as they see their nation being propelled to a better place. They exit a place of uncertainty through the sovereignty of God and the help of those among them who understand the necessity of forging ahead while ensuring that those around them are not left behind in this effort. This is the same intentionality that the church needs today. The Covid-19 pandemic, for so many, was a place of wandering and uncertainty. Now, the Church is in position to move ahead but must do so with all generations in mind for it to be its most effective. For Israel and under David's reign, they can do this. Despite the circumstances, God's purpose for Israel is still in effect through God's promises to David.[17]

The Sons of Issachar originally showed loyalty to Saul. Remember that after Saul is anointed as king, 1 Samuel chapter eleven details the battle with the Ammonites. Prior to this battle, the people of Israel fear engaging in battle with the Ammonites. Saul eventually sends a message to all the people that they are to go out with Saul and Samuel to battle. The scripture says that "And the fear of the Lord fell on the people, and they came out with one consent. When he numbered them in Bezek, the children of Israel

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[17] Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 237.

were three hundred thousand and the men of Judah thirty thousand: (1 Sm. 11:7b-8). At the time of naming David king, the sons of Issachar were numbered. Scripture describes them as those who are among the divisions that are equipped for war and come to David at Hebron to turn over the kingdom of Saul to him (1 Chr. 12:23).

The sons of Issachar "understanding the times" included the wisdom of the sons of Issachar to know *when* to pivot. The loyalty of the sons of Issachar's to Saul is inappropriate for the time of David. They need to pivot if they would join those invested in the longevity and the success of Israel after Saul's reign. Loyalty to a deceased king would only keep them in the past. At the time of David, it was necessary, using wisdom, to pivot and move forward. The wisdom to do this not only benefits them, but generations beyond them.

Consolidated Baptist Church also must consider what it means to pivot as the world approaches almost two years of the Covid-19 pandemic. What previously served Consolidated Baptist Church prior to the pandemic must be re-evaluated and if necessary reimagined. Forward movement requires progression. Although Consolidated Baptist Church is progressive in nature, it will need to be continuously progressive to achieve intergenerational efforts now and post-pandemic. Just as Israel found themselves in many critical moments, the critical moment for Consolidated Baptist Church and the Church at large arrived and accommodating new factors that tie into the worship experiences, in ways that do not muddy the message of the gospel but update the method by which the gospel is shared, is imperative.

Aside from pivoting at a very critical time in the nation's history, the sons of Issachar also had the reputation of being a great resource to Israel because they

understood the times in which they were. The Chronicler writes that "Of the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do, their chiefs were two hundred and all their brethren were at their command" (1 Chr. 12:32). They understand how the time works. The Books of Chronicles provide reflection for the past and vision for the future of Israel. The books were first written to people looking back on the history of Israel from the other side of the exile. The Chronicler also points his readers toward the future, toward the hope of God's promise.[18] This is what the sons of Issachar embraced for the progression of multiple generations in Israel.

This decision is not simply about switching sides. The sons of Issachar must be more intentional than to just casually choose a different side. The wisdom comes because they understand where the favor of God works. Samuel anoints Saul to be king of Israel but hope for his rule is short-lived. Instead of Saul awaiting the arrival of Samuel, he takes it upon himself to offer up a sacrifice. Saul does this knowing full well that it was the role of the priest to offer up a sacrifice before battle. Saul's fault lies not in the precision of his timekeeping but rather in acting independently without Samuel's presence and so failing to follow the letter of the instruction given by Samuel.[19]

The sons of Issachar realized that the favor of God had left Saul. The scripture states that "Samuel said to Saul, 'I will not return with you, for you have rejected the word of the Lord and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel'…And Samuel went no more to see Saul until the day of his death. Nevertheless, Samuel

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[18] James Duguid, *1-2 Chronicles: A 12-Week Study* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 154.

[19] Dawn M. Sellars, "An Obedient Servant?: The Reign of King Saul (1 Samuel 13-15) Reassessed," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35, no. 3 (2011): 325, doi:10.1177/0309089211398710.

mourned for Saul, and the Lord regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel" (1 Sm. 15:26, 35). Saul, once anointed and favored after God instructs God's prophet Samuel to anoint Saul for that time and season, fails in that moment before battle and the favor of God leaves him. A part of the sons of Issachar's effectiveness during a critical time was also understanding when the favor of God was removed from a situation. Saul was "the one" at one point in time, but because of his disobedience (his failure), God rejects Saul.

As Consolidated Baptist Church looks to properly pivot, being aware of the obvious movements of God is key. The church can no longer afford to rely only on the methods of the past to welcome the coming future. The digital age is upon the church and the beginnings of the church are not despised. Still, there is an active awareness that the sons of Issachar possess thereby enabling them to pivot during a challenging and changing time.

This ability to look back and look forward is extremely important. For what Consolidated Baptist Church desires to do—reach all ages and stages of life—it is imperative to reevaluate things based on what worked or failed in the past to determine how Consolidated Baptist Church will move forward to minister in the coming days of the church. What is key is that the Chronicler fails to use this book to highlight or create idols of the past. The Chronicler acknowledges and seemingly appreciates what was. As the times change, a new appreciation develops for what can be for the nation of Israel. Consolidated Baptist Church must take the same approach.

Certainly, reflection would require the sons of Issachar to consider what the times were like before David. They know what the times looked like with Israel in despair under the leadership of Saul. With David as king, they realize the anointing God so

sovereignly places on David's life and the sons of Issachar make a conscious choice to operate in a different mindset and creativity. A distinction should be made for remembering versus an attempt to re-live. Remembering from whence they came is proper for the sons of Issachar and even Israel. Not lost on either of them is the fact that what was once appropriate for that group during that day is no longer appropriate. Likewise, it is proper for Consolidated Baptist Church to consider the same.

Still, just as the sons of Issachar have the wisdom to do so, Consolidated Baptist Church must determine between the timebound and timeless if they are to properly pivot for intergenerational ministry in this time of the Covid-19 pandemic and even when the world reaches a post-pandemic reality. The reality that exists now is one of determining, as the sons of Issachar understood, what is appropriate for that time, season, and those people. The sons of Issachar properly pivot for the current and future peoples due to the reasons in their present. Consideration of structures and practices in ministry must be at the forefront of this pivot. This assessment is critical to how multiple generations will be served simultaneously and in one space. Without this approach to a new space of ministry, the desired outcome for intergenerational ministry via a digital platform may not be prominent. With this approach, Consolidated Baptist Church will indeed minister to all ages and stages of life and connect them simultaneously.

Clearly, the sons of Issachar want to know what is best for God's people and how to achieve that. Perhaps, the practices that are in place for discerning God's will apply to the work of pivoting during these challenging times for the church. Through prayer, study of the Scriptures, and a sensitivity and openness to hearing from the Spirit of God makes all the difference in discerning God's will. In this way, the church heeds Paul's words to

"not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2 ESV). Those with the charge to lead others in the kingdom of God must discern what the will of God is for the people of God. This is not to manipulate them, but for the edification of the church and the kingdom. Essentially, getting to know the character of God helps the believer to understand the will of God specifically for the people of God. This can certainly be said of how the sons of Issachar live out their days during the time that Saul must descend the throne and David is set to ascend to it. It proves to be a delicate task for sure.

One way that the task of discerning the will of God for the people of God, for Israel, can be found is in their support of David that fails to push him to a particular place before it is time. Surely, Israel is in a very difficult space as Saul is king and they see what plays out among the nation. All Israel comes together to David at Hebron, saying, "Indeed we are your own flesh and blood. Also, in times past even when Saul was king, you were the one who led Israel out and brought them in; and the Lord your God said to you, 'You shall shepherd My people Israel, and be ruler over My people Israel'" (1 Chr. 11:1-2). What is critical here is that the sons of Issachar nor any of the others of the tribes of Israel hurry David to the throne. To most, apparently David would become king soon even as David is anointed prior to his ascension. They trust God's timing and that means having the patience to await a coming king.

Chronicles fails to idealize or romanticize the kings but shows them as fallible and frail human beings who can reign only though Yahweh's power.[20] Still, even as God

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[20] Louis C. Jonker, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 603.

is sovereign to know that David and Solomon would mess up, God still chooses to use them. Therefore, the people, including the sons of Issachar, see how God works through David. They see how God uses David to address the needs of Israel. They see the sovereignty of God in action even with Saul as king. Still, they fail to hurry David to a position that he fails to yet acquire from God. The prophecy from Samuel is never in danger of failing to come to pass because David fails to usurp Samuel but continues to serve Saul.

The danger of rushing to an end without the guidance and wisdom of God fails to put the people of God in the best place to excel and may even challenge the witness of the church to reach those outside the family of faith. One must distinguish between what is urgent and what is rushed. Consolidated Baptist Church making the pivot that supports an intergenerational congregation through virtual connectivity is urgent, and one cannot forget this. Consolidated Baptist Church understanding that rushing to meet an end may be counter to what God desires to do is likewise imperative. If the sons of Issachar resort to rushing David to a particular place or position, they would miss several details that would help the people of Israel. Certainly, David would miss pertinent details relative to his ascension.

Since there was a sense of urgency among the sons of Issachar and all of Israel's leaders, they give proper attention to their situation and make the proper decision without delay. Through their timing and the action, with discernment, they realize that more is to come. This is the balance of the times and how important and necessary is this balance. This balance can literally determine the survival of the local church. Paul's words to the church at Philippi make this clear: "be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer

and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7). The anxiety that can come because of this new space in a pandemic, could easily distract the local church from operating with a sense of urgency rather with a sense of panic or rush. Again, this is a counter-productive approach to the work of a church near the end of a pandemic or post-pandemic church.

One should also consider the further contributions made by the sons of Issachar beyond David's reign. This is the intergenerational approach that must be taken. What the sons of Issachar contribute to the history of the tribe and of Israel continues to flow through the other sons of Issachar where they are given opportunities to serve regardless of who was king. The scriptures fail to say much more about Jashub, Puah or Shimron, but this is not an indication of their impact to the nation and to the time. Information that which is available comes through the role and witness of Puah's son Tola.

In addition to the six major judges, the author gives few details about the careers of six minor judges including Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon.[21] In Israel's history, though these judges possess wisdom, wholistically Israel cultivated a cycle of sin. Israel often did wrong. Israel knew what was right and Israel still disobeyed God. One wonders what they will do not that these persons are handed over on account of sin and placed in tribulation. Indeed, Origen writes "And they cried out to the Lord when they were being oppressed, and he freed them from their exigent circumstances. And he led them out from darkness and the shadow of death, and he broke off their chains."[22] As

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[21] Arnold and Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament*, 159.

[22] Origen, "Homily Three," in *Homilies on Judges*, trans. Elizabeth Ann Dively Lauro (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 62, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt32b0wd.9.

a result, God punishes them. This cycle of sin then continues to include a time where Israel, after God had commands God's punishment on them, would cry out to God for deliverance from their despair and punishment. Soon enough, God would raise up a judge who was put in place to help deliver Israel out of their mess.

For Tola and judges like him, understanding the times meant investigating the times and issues so that Israel could receive the proper help. This approach has two sides: the physical world and the supernatural. The knowledge the men and women pursue in Judges is what moderns label as indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge deals with both the temporal and supernatural words, worlds not sharply differentiated in pre-scientific societies. In the Book of Judges, strongmen seek temporal knowledge about land rights, strategies for battle, the location of secret entrances in city walls, potential political conspiracies, and diplomatic history. They also collect information about who has wealth, who could be taxed and who could be trusted.[23] In essence, these men and women pay attention to what happens around them in the physical world. God gives them this wisdom that drove them to investigate their current space to understand the times in which they live. Without this perspective, truly these Judges—including Tola—perhaps would be unable to assist Israel as effectively as others.

However, even more important for people in the Book of Judges was an understanding of the supernatural world. As anthropologist Harry G. West notes, people who acknowledge a supernatural realm seek to comprehend, gain access to, manipulate, and benefit from the world. Such insight, entrée, and control complement and enhance

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[23] John C. Yoder, "Power and Knowledge," in *Power and Politics in the Book of Judges: Men and Women of Valor* (Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2015), 2, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt12878ws.6.

knowledge and actions in the temporal domain.[24] They not only understood the physical world around them, but they also understood what happened around them supernaturally. Therefore, an understanding and awareness of both worlds can coexist if the people of God will be helped. Judges like Deborah and Tola discern the voice and will of God for Israel while simultaneously understanding where they were and what happens. They eventually know the steps and needs for moving the people forward.

One can say the same of the example of Mordecai and Esther. The Old Testament book of Esther tells the story of a Jewish woman who operates among and becomes queen of a Persian empire because of the providence of God and an understanding of the times. Her presence in the palace of the Persians, as queen, proves to be critical. Her cousin Mordecai is the catalyst in helping to assist Esther. He assists in orchestrating a plan that saves the Jews from annihilation at the hands of Haman.

Even in the hesitation of Esther, Mordecai understands what it would take to help the Jews get out of what they were in and move forward as God's people. Mordecai tells Esther:

> Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this? (Est. 4:13-14).

What Mordecai makes abundantly clear is that this is the time for Esther to step up. The survival of the Jews is tied to her obedience. In subsequent verses, Mordecai understands what to do. Once he investigates the issues, he uses prayer and wisdom to point the people in the right direction. Mordecai, understanding and aware of the environment

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[24] Yoder, "Power and Knowledge," 2.

around him, provides the people with pointed details for their survival. He fails to rush

his instructions, but he does have a sense of urgency to accomplish what is necessary.

What he believes God to have the people to do, he communicates that in a timely manner.

As with the example of Tola and other some of the other judges of Israel's history,

Mordecai is committed to the supernatural and aware of the physical world. With proper

priorities, he does what is necessary and ultimately succeeds in his efforts.

This is even appropriate for how Consolidated Baptist Church will move forward

with an intergenerational approach to embracing virtual ministry. There must be a

commitment to the supernatural as the world of the church operates through a holy God

and that same God has likewise given God's church the knowledge and wisdom to

operate in this world. First and foremost, spirituality cannot be set aside to pacify the

desires of the times.

Additionally, what is physically present among Consolidated Baptist Church and

the community it serves cannot afford for the church to turn a blind eye toward it. One of

the strengths of this church is that both the supernatural and physical world are

acknowledged in a way that maintains God as the primary authority while acknowledging

what occurs in the physical world around the church. To ignore either side is to put at risk

misunderstanding God's will for God's people and may even delay what can benefit all

generations of Consolidated Baptist Church.

Along with investing his time for the benefit of Israel, Tola also understands the

times and provides the Israelites with godly counsel in the wake of hard times. Again,

Israel is in a cycle of sin that sees their punishment in full force for disobeying God.

Though a minor judge, God sends Tola to help Israel. The Bible says that "After

Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola the son of Puah, the son of Dodo, a man of

Issachar; and he dwelt in Shamir in the mountains of Ephraim. He judged Israel twenty-

three years; and he died and was buried in Shamir" (Jgs. 10:1-2). God raises Tola to the

position of judge due to his obedience to God. Tola does what God tells him and as a

result, God places him in a position see Israel to its deliverance. He is a judge in the sense

of a judge being a rescuer, and a rescuer being an agent of justice. This was Tola's

responsibility to Israel.[25]

Remember that Tola's leadership to Israel comes on the heels of Abimelech's

actions. Sometimes referred to as 'Israel's unanointed and uninaugurated king,' much

becomes known about his rise to king.[26] He goes to his father's house at Ophrah and kills

his brothers, the seventy sons of Jerubbaal, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of

Jerubbaal remains because he hides himself. Abimelech kills his family to assume the

position of king of Shechem and by the time of his death, civil war is at his door. The

ironic stone wound that contributes to his death, initiated by a woman, precedes the

request for his armourbearer to stab him lest he lose any more honor in death. Tola's

position as judge must follow the drama of a self-made king and very troublesome times

for the people.

No details of Tola's rule exist other than what the Book of Judges mentions in

chapter ten. Still, one should not ignore Tola, as a judge, when considering how the sons

of Issachar contribute to the forward progression and peace of Israel. For twenty-three

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[25] Kenneth C. Way, "The Meaning of the Minor Judges: Understanding the Bible's Shortest Stories," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61, no. 2 (2018): 279.

[26] Marty Alan Michelson, "Abimelech," in *Reconciling Violence and Kingship: A Study of Judges and 1 Samuel*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, UK: The Lutterworth Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cgf0qx.6.

years, the wisdom of the sons of Issachar comes through the work of Tola as a minor

judge in Israel and one scholar suggests that Tola's importance to the region during his

reign as judge is tied to the names associated with him. In addition, the clues to Tola's

life are embedded in the meaning and symbolism of some names mentioned in Judges

chapter ten. What exists is a hypothetical reconstruction of Tola's judgeship by analyzing

the meanings of the names associated with him and by juxtaposing the alongside the

multiple biblical references and prophecies that refer to his tribal patriarch Issachar.[27]

Considering the length of his leadership is important as well. Surely, as God

appoints him and places him in the position of a minor judge and there is no additional

information provided about him, the consideration that this minor judge's ability to

discern what is necessary for the people of God during this time is appropriate. Though it

is more likely that Tola is judge for a portion of Israel—a more regional approach—the

impact stretched generations. This is the same perspective applicable to the churches of

today. Whether the leadership of those who understand the times is a local or regional

thing or done in a more national or broader context, this impact must happen if the church

local and global are to move forward. Just as in the case with Tola, this impact, no matter

its level, can have a positive intergenerational approach.

Ultimately, the church global and the local church of Consolidated Baptist Church

must be intentional in its efforts to pivot during this time if it is to see the

intergenerational interaction and connectivity it desires. First Chronicles 12:23-38

provides a realistic view into the necessity of the pivot of a people who are to carry out

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[27] Nathan Moskowitz, "Tola the Judge: A New Midrashic Analysis," *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2015): 17–21, *Gale Academic OneFile,* https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A519900065/AONE?u=txshracd2488&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=c5b92031.

the will of God here on earth. The sons of Issachar understand their times not just to be in possession of a knowledge that could point to progression but to show that implementing that knowledge is paramount if Israel is to benefit from what they possess.

Just as the figurative David of the local congregation cannot, the David who leads the nation of Israel could not do what he does without the sovereignty of God as well as the assistance of the sons of Issachar and other men of tribes under his leadership. The ways in which the sons of Issachar contribute to David's leadership, sets Israel up for successes beyond them and even beyond David's lifetime. What they see, understand, and implement sees them through very challenging times. This reality comes through a mutual partnership between pastor and people to be of service to those of the current context no matter their ages or stages in life. That which the church implements among the people would serve and connect all generations.

In an assessment of the major and minor judges of Israel, which includes one of the sons of Issachar—Tola, attention is given to what leaders and parishioners did with the information given in scriptures. Essentially, "the issues that the Israelites faced in their time are the issues we face, and the options open to us are roughly similar to theirs."[28] Though perhaps not in the same pandemic as today, Israel faces a challenging time that requires their attention, cooperation, and creativity if they are to continue. Without this commitment, many congregations will be left behind. Even if the reality is that only a few parishioners failed to adopt the connectivity in a virtual space, if one is behind, the congregation is delayed.

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[28] Hillel I. Millgram, *Judges and Saviors, Deborah and Samson: Reflection of a World in Chaos* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2018), 127.

This portion of work is necessary to reveal the biblical foundation for the need for an intergenerational congregation to embrace virtual connectivity by pivoting. That foundation is that there is a godly perspective for embracing advanced methods in communicating and the message of Christ and discerning His will for His people. The next consideration is to determine, with this foundational understanding of the need to pivot in a time like this, the next steps to reach the goal of virtual connectivity without excluding any member of the congregation.

Just as the world begins with innovation and creativity of God, these characteristics must not cease in the people of God. Although there may not be an immediate biblical understanding, it should certainly be communicated that the relationship between God, innovation, creativity, and technology or virtual connectivity exists. Each new technological conception includes aspects of the image of the creator being imbued in that creation. This creation perhaps was birthed out of love with the best intentions. Often it is not long before there is a fall when the creation ends up being used for something outside of its original intent. Just as God elects God's covenant people to be involved with the redemption of humanity, humanity's role regarding technological things should also be one of redemption. In the case of technology, it is not typically the technological object that must be redeemed from slavery but interaction with technology that needs redemption. The dictionary definition of restore is "to bring back to or put back into a former or original state."[29] One must responsibly take on this delicate task.

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[29] Stephen Whiting, "Towards a Biblical View of Technology," Mount Vernon Nazarene University, June 27-July 1, 2011, https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.662.6270&rep=rep1&type=pdf#:~:text=Paul%2 0commends%20believers%20to%20%E2%80%9Cdo,the%20internet%20should%20glorify%20God.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Once Consolidated Baptist Church understands the necessity of pivoting that affects multiple generations simultaneously or over time, it must also look at how pivots in historical spaces via recording technologies have left an indelible mark on the history of the world, the history of American culture, and ultimately the history of the Black church. The impressions left in these various spaces and on these cultures have helped to foster interconnectedness among generations. Again, pivoting via technologies has always been a part of the ministry of the global church. Though these facets may seem much more antiquated to those who experience modern age technologies, pivots were made through all types of technologies.

The history of Christ's church saw benefits in technological pivots as early as the Bronze Age. When the church considers the phrase "Roman roads," it automatically thinks of the spiritual concept of Romans roads. This notion highlights the plan of God to save humanity through salvation in Jesus Christ. Using scripture to present the work of salvation to its audience ultimately communicates the message of the gospel. The actual physical Romans roads aided in the communication as well as the spread of the gospel. The pivots from the ancient roads of the ancient world to the newer ones was imperative. Engineers were audacious in their plans to join one point to another in as direct a line as possible, whatever the difficulties in geography and costs. Roman roads included bridges,

tunnels, viaducts, and many other architectural and engineering tricks to create a series of breathtaking but highly practical monuments, which spread from Portugal to Constantinople.[1]

The church's history also includes the benefits of technological pivots via the printing press. To further communicate the gospel to others simultaneously, having this medium to share the gospel with others proved to be critical to Christianity. Even after the technological advancement of papyrus paper, they held some of the most vital information of the work of God, the life of Christ, and the witness of the disciples, so the pivot to the printing press was highly influential as well. Given the church's influence in Western Europe at the time of the printing press inventor Johannes Gutenberg, it is unsurprising that the first printed book was the Bible and that arguably the most influential printed work of the time was Martin Luther's The Ninety-Five Theses. In fact, a significant number of the earliest printed works were of a religious nature.[2]

The progression of pivoting in the history of the world as a more digital age began to emerge, translated to a progression in the culture of church ministry. With the developments of audio-visual technologies, it was not just the secular world that benefitted from these pivots and advancements, but the church saw the benefits of radio and television as a means of communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ. One of the million expressions of this are through the use of these facets at Oral Roberts University. The architecture of Oral Roberts University reified the so-called electronic church in

[1] Mark Cartwright, s.v. "Romans Roads," World History Encyclopedia, 1, https://www.worldhistory.org/article/758/roman-roads/.

[2] Oregon State University, "Religion in Print," Treasures of the McDonald Collection, Oregon State University Libraries, http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/mcdonald/public/religion/.

America, the collection of religious radio, television, and now online ministries dominated by Christian evangelicals. While the electronic church ostensibly existed in radio waves and satellite transmission, radio evangelists and televangelists in the 1960's through the 1980s realized ambitious architectural programs.[3] From radio broadcasts to televangelism, the witness of Christ reached across state lines, countries, and seas.

The overarching notion is that through every pivot and technological advancement, multiple generations of individuals were helped and hoped through these mediums and these intentional shifts in ministry. All these advancements served an age or stage in life and had the opportunity to bring these same ages and stages together. The ability to relate to one another and even learn about each other was made possible through these shifts. The same effectiveness has existed in other forms as the church sought to include sound reproduction in its spaces. One advancement that made this shift possible was done through the phonograph.

The American inventor Thomas Alva Edison developed the first practical device for recording and reproducing sound in 1877. He called his device a phonograph, meaning sound writer, because of the crude, mechanically cut impression or writing it made on the surface of the recording cylinder.[4] Edison's unique contribution was to American history and culture and to world history and culture, and this cannot be easily dismissed. The primary use of this advancement was essentially to reproduce various

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[3] Margaret M. Grubiak, "An Architecture for the Electronic Church: Oral Roberts University in Tulsa Oklahoma," *Technology and Culture* 57, no. 2 (2016): 380-413, https://www.proquest.com/docview/1800508273/fulltext/79D830DAA7BA4278PQ/1?accountid=7014&forcedol=true.

[4] Elena Ryzhov, s.v. "Phonograph," *Gale Encyclopedia of Science*, 1, https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/ps/i.do?p=SCIC&u=txshracd2488&id= GALE|CX8124401890&v=2.1&it=r.

types of sounds for others to hear. The phonograph's design included a stylus or a needle that trailed the groove of a revolving disc.

Through the use of phonographs, individuals and users were able to listen to music and audio recordings of all genres and types. In former days, particularly those of slavery, spirituals were often sung as a measure of one's faith in God and for the benefit of communicating various messages between slaves that could lead to one's freedom. Still, the mode of preservation for these timeless and priceless songs was primarily an oral tradition. In orality, the songs and their messages were passed from one generation to the next. In this passing along, generations were connected even if they did not share the same experiences. The benefit was to emphasize understanding of the history of African Americans in the world and, in particular, the Americas. Even in this appreciation of rich oral history, the need to have these words and melodies digitized in some way was necessary to preserve not just a culture but a people.

The phonograph was remarkable. This device allowed anyone the opportunity to listen to music at any time and in any place. Wherever they were physically, whatever time of day it was, and anyone could listen to what was playing from the phonograph for as long as they desired. Eventually, the update to the phonograph would be the gramophone. The difference would be that a phonograph used a spinning cylinder to record sounds or play recorded sounds. The gramophone used a revolving flat disk to record or play recorded sounds.

Though the phonograph would be updated as technologies increased, the initial phonograph was remarkable. Vinyl was the next pivot regarding the phonograph. Vinyl, initially, held only minutes of recording. In modern times, only the limitation could have

been questionable. Bearing in mind the time, point in history, and newness of such an

invention, this is quite a feat and appropriate. Surely as times progress and technology

grows, limitations in minutes would be discretional.

The uses of the phonograph proved to be extensive. In 1878, Edison speculated on

several possible uses for his new invention. The possible uses included letter writing and

all kinds of dictation without the aid of a stenographer. [5] It included phonographic books,

which speak to blind people without effort on their part; reproduction of music; the

preservation of languages by exact reproduction of the manner of pronouncing;

educational purposes such as preserving the explanations made by a teacher so that the

pupil can refer to them at any moment, and connection with the telephone, to make that

instrument an auxiliary in the transmission of permanent and invaluable records.[6] These

are just a few ways the phonograph was integrated into the culture. Even in all these

approaches, the possibilities produced from the phonograph served all generations. It

communicated messages from one generation to another to have a level of information

and even create a space of participation. Again, this is important to highlight because

these advancements do not just seek to serve one particular people, at one time, or for one

reason. The multifaceted and multiuse of the phonograph provided a significant impact

on a consistently pivoting world.

It is important to know the phonograph had uses prior to church culture, even yet

African American church culture. From a world perspective, the country's history that

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[5] Rebecca P. Butler, "Thomas Edison Speculates on the Uses of the Phonograph," *The History Corner* 56, no. 4 (2012): 8, https://link-springer-com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/content/pdf/10.1007/s11528-012-0579-z.pdf.

[6] Butler, "Thomas Edison Speculates on the Uses of the Phonograph," 8.

details the benefits of the phonograph includes Japan. Here, the telephone and

phonograph allowed the voice and spoken language to be transmitted and, perhaps more

importantly, inscribed and archived, thus freeing spoken language from the dual

constraints of spatial locality and temporal ephemerality turn transformed the voice into a

cultural-material artifact.[7] The Japanese give special attention to the Meiji era and the

Taishō emperor. This emperor benefitted from the presence of the phonograph in their

cultures and country. The music that came from the phonograph had multiple uses. Music

of all kinds took on new social and cultural roles when it became mechanically

reproducible.[8] This statement is even visible in the modern world as music has taken on

many uses beyond personal and communal entertainment. Its purpose has broadened as

the music continues to inform people and culture on several topics.

The phonograph reached other parts of the world as well. The phonograph

allowed soldiers to take music off to war with them. In 1917, when the United States

became involved in World War I, the Edison Company designed a special phonograph

model for the United States Army. The basic machine sold for sixty dollars. Many Army

units purchased these phonographs because it meant a lot to the soldiers to have music to

cheer them and remind them of home.[9] Still, the purpose of the phonograph went beyond

just musical entertainment for the emotional strength of soldiers. Its practical use

extended to soldiers as a device for being able to give commands that were often slightly

inaudible and making them more audible for training and combat use. Using the

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[7] Kerim Yasar, *Electrified Voices: How the Telephone, Phonograph, and Radio Shaped Modern Japan, 1868-1945* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), 433.

[8] Yasar, *Electrified Voices*, 433.

[9] The Library of Congress, "Edison Invents the Phonograph," America's Story from America's Library, https://www.americaslibrary.gov/aa/edison/aa_edison_phonograph_3.html.

phonograph, for this reason, would have been crucial to the success of any command or unit by ensuring directions for combat were heard clearly.

This world view of the phonograph's use is essential to see that its effects were not simply localized to its place of invention. This is important to consider because one of the goals of the various advancements of society should go beyond its locality. The impacts of the shift from dependence on passing along information from person to person and generation to generation were worldwide and cross-generational. This same perspective can be said for the country in which the phonograph got its start, America. In American culture, the phonograph was immensely appreciated for its many uses.

According to American history, the phonograph affected ethnography. Ethnography included the work of anthropologists to have descriptions and documented knowledge of a particular culture and people. A portion of American history records that ethnography was used to curate this information. An ethnographer was responsible for finding a way to preserve decades and even century-old cultural histories and practices. When done correctly and integrally, the practice of ethnography is key to cultural preservation.

As the phonograph made its impact on the world, it indeed impacted the art of ethnography. The invention of the phonograph was instantly recognized as an opportunity to preserve patterns of human expression objectively and accurately.[10] For societies that had not yet taken the opportunity to understand other cultures among them or societies with a sincere desire to know cultures outside of theirs, the phonograph was an excellent

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[10] Erika Brady, *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography* (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2tv9gv.

resource that gathered those expressions in one place to be transported to others at any time.

Although there was an honest appreciation for the phonograph, the truth is that there was simultaneously skepticism about the invention. The first encounters with the phonograph did not occur in the laboratory, pure settings. However, the reports of these encounters are not necessarily objective accounts of the vent, especially in culture terms. Instead, we have anecdotal accounts such as sensitive souls fainting with astonishment, tribal chiefs trembling in aw, countrified hicks fumbling for an explanation.[11] The reality is that as practical positives are highlighted at the introduction of an invention, it is likewise fair to acknowledge its apprehensions. This awareness does not seek to degrade the use of the phonograph, but it is an important reminder for those who embrace advances to ensure that the use of technologies remains pure in its form and honest in its application.

This statement suggests that accountability in technological advancement must be a part of its progress and appreciation if it is wholly effective. The use of the phonograph, in this setting, could have been much more paramount had the intentions of its use among Native Americans not been so self-gratuitous and insensitive. Jesse Walter Fewkes (1850-1930) was a proper Bostonian and began his career as a zoologist, trained at Harvard and Leipzig. Fired with the possibilities presented by the phonograph, Fewkes first traveled to Calais, Maine, in March 1890 to experiment with its use in a genuine field encounter. The Passamaquoddy recordings made by Fewkes were a little more than a trial of the machine using a tribe located in relatively convenient proximity. Fewkes'

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[11] Brady, *A Spiral Way*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2tv9gv.

initial enthusiasm for the machine's use in the field had its basis in his training as a zoologist.[12] Once again, the dignity that must be attached to technological advancements and uses cannot be ignored. The use of technology should not entail the disrespect or misappropriation of a group for the gain of a single individual or a group of individuals.

Still, not all the uses of the phonograph in American culture were perverted by self-serving and self-promoting persons. There are several positively documented uses of this invention in a variety of spaces. Edison envisioned a welter of uses, including for business, "to make dolls speak, sing, cry or to record the last words of dying persons."[13] This may seem morbid, but it was helpful for the grieving and those desiring to hold on to a piece of their loved one. Modern therapists have seen this practice with children and adults alike. The familiar voice of a loved one passed on in fabric and doll stuffing walls is a uniquely helpful experience for some people.

Back in the mid-1800s, to hear a song, there was only one option, live. Live meant either someone else played it, or it was personally played. In 1878, he made a prediction, "the phonograph will undoubtedly be liberally devoted to music." He was right. Within a few years, entrepreneurs began putting phonograph recordings, mostly on wax cylinders, into "coin-in-slot" machines on city streets, where passerby could listen to several minutes of audio: Jokes, monologues, songs.[14] The success of the phonograph would be as social as it was financial. While live musically entertaining opportunities

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[12] Brady, *A Spiral Way*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2tv9gv.

[13] Clive Thompson, "How the Phonograph Changed Music Forever," *Smithsonian Magazine* (January 6, 2016), https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/phonograph-changed-music-forever-180957677/.

[14] Thompson, "How the Phonograph Changed Music Forever," https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/phonograph-changed-music-forever-180957677/.

stood to prove economically successful, there was simultaneously economic success with the phonograph, as wax cylinders played music generally heard during a live show. To sit in a restaurant, walk down the street, have access to what one has heard or never heard but immediately developed a liking for what was attractive and entertaining to many.

As it relates to the phonograph, while the 1920s was probably one of the most tumultuous, it was part of a broader shift that Americans were experiencing in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. They were entering a world of mass culture, in which goods, including cultural goods such as sound recording, films, and more, were produced and consumed on a scale previously unknown. Music and sound technologies were part of this shift, and indeed the phonograph, preceded by the player piano, introduced a new mode in the commodification of music as it became something that one purchased a sound.[15] This concept of mass culture includes the mass production of an item that audiences purchased. This is essentially how the impact of the phonograph came to be. Because of its impact, consumers used every resource and means for acquisition of the phonograph for their use.

There was more that the acquisition of this device did the gratification of its purchase. The advent of the phonograph, the sound film, and the radio played an essential part in this significant shift in American life. Families and neighbors listened together to records and large audiences convened daily in movie houses; nationwide thousands, eventually millions, shared live musical or theatrical performances over the radio.[16]

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[15] Timothy D. Taylor, Mark Katz, and Tony Grajeda, eds., *Music, Sound and Technology in America: A Documentary History of Early Phonograph, Cinema, and Radio* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 258.

[16] Taylor, *Music, Sound and Technology in America*, 258.

Notably, bringing together families and neighbors to listen to pre-recordings was one of the wins in the history of the phonograph. The phonograph had the ability to bring groups together in one place to enjoy and be enlightened by what they were experiencing. In addition to the content, it was the accessibility that was attractive to the American culture. Considering those unable to travel enjoyed what was played via the phonograph was important contribution during those times. Those who may have been physically unable to be in a space where a live recording could happen would have appreciated the phonograph's invention. Those individuals who may have been financially unable to participate in live events would have appreciated this shift in technology as well.

Eventually, America and the world would see the constant shift in technology even after the invention of the phonograph, but it began with the phonograph. The baby boomer generation of the 1950s would often enjoy music for the medium of an eight-track tape and eventually a cassette tape. This meant that music could be transported anywhere, especially in a car. Many automobiles came equipped to play music from the eight-track or the cassette tape. The ability to transport music anywhere was the beginning of an essential music-without-walls concept. The mobility of the phonograph was available at its inception but may not have always been a purchase connected to an immediate need. In the way that the evolution of the phonograph eventually produces eight-track tapes, the messages that individuals or groups wished to be shared with others had no boundaries. The phonograph created a way for these recordings of various kinds to be made available to all willing to listen.

The millennial was birthed and exposed to the world of CDs and MP3s. The pivots in technologies continued as needs for sound recording arose. CDs for all persons

who used them did not simply carry the message of music on them. CDs very often stored audio recordings for books and even entire church services or sermons. Eventually, CDs would go on to create MP3s and MP3 players. In conjunction with the World Wide Web, these mediums often saw users engage in platforms such as Napster and LimeWire. The media collected on and distributed from internet sites such as these were not done with permissions. Naturally, these platforms created legal and economic problems that desperately needed to be addressed.

As the phonograph evolved from its original state, other facets of American culture were impacted because of the phonograph, and the Black church was among those impacted. Whether it was the music or the preaching, the Black church needed to have a way to archive the voices, words, and melodies of its experience for the current and future generations. As the history of the Black church is documented, its strong oral tradition must be appreciated. Centuries-old, the oral traditions of the Black church are as prevalent as they are powerful.

The spirituals evolved out of an oral tradition, sung solo or in groups, and improvised. We do not know the names of the people who wrote these songs. They were not written down at the time.[17] As many slaves were not permitted to be literate, the oral tradition was imperative to the early Black church in America. Although slaves were often forced to hear and repeat traditional White Methodist and Baptist jargon and beliefs, they still held on to and maintained traditions specific to their history and journey.

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[17] Jerry Zolten, "How They Got Over: A Brief Overview of Black Gospel Quartet Music," Juniata College, 2015, https://www.juniata.edu/offices/juniata-voices/media/volume-16/vol16-Zolten.pdf.

One group that used the phonograph to help preserve of the sound of spirituals was the Fisk University Jubilee Singers. Initially, their words and sounds through spirituals were performed. Gracing persons with their presence, the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang for a wide range of persons that even included royals from foreign countries. The cross-cultural reach of the Fisk Jubilee singers was evident in their work. Still, the work possessed an intergenerational approach as well. After the turn of the twentieth century, the Fisk Jubilee Singers were the first African American groups to make sound recordings on phonograph records.[18]

As the Black church's impact continued, a new sound emerged as the gospel quartet tradition. These groups typically consisted of four individuals who sang acapella or instrumental music about their faith. The Fairfield Four are part of the early gospel quartet tradition, for at least we have come to know it through phonograph records that preserved the music starting in the 1920s.[19] Preserving the works by these groups and others is one of the facets of understanding the Black church's impact on American culture. Because this music was preserved, with the invention of the phonograph, all generations have access to this authentic sound. In Pennsylvania, it was not unusual to find records by many pioneering gospel groups, including the Fairfield Four, the Dixie Hummingbirds, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and many others.[20]

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[18] Zolten, "How They Got Over," https://www.juniata.edu/offices/juniata-voices/media/volume-16/vol16-Zolten.pdf.

[19] Zolten, "How They Got Over," https://www.juniata.edu/offices/juniata-voices/media/volume-16/vol16-Zolten.pdf.

[20] Zolten, "How They Got Over," https://www.juniata.edu/offices/juniata-voices/media/volume-16/vol16-Zolten.pdf.

It is likewise important to mention that these phonographic recordings were not simply about preserving the history of Blacks in America or the Black church. Ultimately, one of the goals of preserving Black church music was the communication of the gospel. The oral tradition of spirituals served multiple purposes. Among those purposes was the opportunity to express one's witness of faith, use that faith as a means of accessing the strength of what they sang about, and communicate messages to other slaves that could not be decoded by slave masters so inhumanely owned Black bodies.

The phonograph helped communicate the witness of slaves, and even their descendants would eventually be freed. The gospel of Jesus Christ reached all generations and, in some spaces, simultaneously because of the phonograph. This technology was used to benefit the furtherance of the gospel through its witness in song. Though more advancements have been made in sound recordings, this initial effort proved to benefit the Black church and its constituents.

In having a great foundational understanding of the phonograph's use in history, specifically of the Black church, the roots of spirituals that evolved into gospel music were that of preaching. Uptake of the religion was relatively slow at first, but the slave population was fascinated by biblical stories containing parallels to their own lives and created spirituals that retold narratives about biblical figures like Daniel and Moses. As Africanized Christianity took hold of the slave population, spirituals served as a way to express the community's new faith, as well as its sorrows and hopes.[21] Because of the preaching of the gospel, many spirituals took shape after hearing about biblical accounts of injustice, and the hope of the God made flesh through Jesus Christ. The gospel

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[21] Library of Congress, "African American Spirituals," Library of Congress, 2015, https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/.

communicated through preaching translated to the gospel being communicated through song.

"His sermons," the first phonograph sermon commercial declared, are "given in a spirited evangelistic style!"[22] The Columbia advertisement, complete with an image of the pioneering phonograph preacher Reverend Calvin P. Dixon, promised consumers that the pair of four-minute homilies, "get under your skin and are not easily forgotten!"[23] The gospel, as preached in the Black church, eventually made its way to the phonograph. Because the phonograph had such an impact outside of the church, it is not a surprise of its impact among the church. This was yet another way the gospel was communicated not simply cross-culturally but intergenerationally. Reverend Dixon's success was no doubt a significant beginning to the production of recording Black preaching. The sermon advertisements revealed the emergence of Black sermons as a modern commodity.[24]

As the phonograph began to capture the gospel's message via the Black church experience, it became apparent that the style of the Black preacher was diverse. Still acknowledging Black preaching through its content, the style in which the preacher delivered varied, and the phonograph captured this diversity. Popular phonograph preachers, all born in the rural South a generation or so after slavery, eschewed the urbane, didactic, and stoic serons of the Black Billy Sunday and Reverend William Arthur White. Instead, they preached their homilies in Black vernacular expression,

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[22] Lerone A. Martin, *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014), 62.

[23] Martin, *Preaching on Wax,* 62.

[24] Martin, *Preaching on Wax*, 63.

which is in the form of the folk sermon.[25] This diversity should be seen as competitive in its original nature. Perhaps the diversity in expressions of preaching spoke to the gifts and anointings of each preacher whom God had called to preach the gospel to local and global churches. This diversity could be as appreciated as the diverse mediums in which the Black church was able to share the message of Jesus Christ with others.

The diversity of preaching would capture the attention of various groups within the Black church. Depending on the reception style and need of the believer there were options available to anyone who wanted to be a recipient of the preached word. Diversity of preaching is essential, as everyone has a distinct reception value to all information or truths presented to them. For those who embraced and valued the message of the Black preacher and the Black church, this diversity was and is necessary. The diversity of preaching had an intergenerational approach and success as well. The idea that a consistent message, told to various generations, in a diverse way or presentation is so significant to the history of the Black preacher and the Black church.

Capturing this diversity did not come without a benefit to the phonograph industry, Reverend James M. Gates was the first to record a hit sermon. The phonograph industry, in turn, recognized the lucrative potential of Black preachers and their sermons. Together these discerning media preachers and the entertainment industry created popular Black religious broadcasting.[26] Certainly, the phonograph industry saw an opportunity for a new business market. The popularity of Black preaching among its culture and other cultures was prevalent. Still, the desire was to spread the message of Jesus Christ. The

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[25] Martin, *Preaching on Wax*, 92.

[26] Martin, *Preaching on Wax*, 92.

pivot of phonographic preaching to broadcasting speaks to the consistent advancements

of technology and how the Black church used these advancements to benefit the people

and for the glory of God.

The presence of the phonograph also proved lucrative for the Black preacher as

well. Gates amassed significant wealth at the outset of his career. In 1926 alone,

Reverend Gates released over ninety sermons. This output likely amounted to nine

thousand dollars. In current terms, the flat payments amounted to more than half a million

dollars.[27] This success did not serve as the initial motivation of Reverend Gates' recorded

sermons. Gates had no idea that this would be his reality and would not have been a

reality for him if the phonograph industry had not seen the financial future it could have

as a means of recording Black preaching. What became a part of modern church culture

is the recording of all types of preaching that has indeed financially blessed the individual

who communicated the gospel's message, but it also put the church in a position to

continue to embrace the technologies that came with shifts in the times. Embracing such

opportunities has even put local churches in the position of furthering ministry in the

communities that it serves and even around the world.

The popularity of the phonograph among Black preaching was not a coincidence.

In the 1920s and 1930s, radio broadcasted the sermons of prominent White clerics, such

as Aimee Semple McPherson. Meanwhile, sponsors shied away from African American

clergy.[28] This is not surprising as the radio industry was not interested in the message

communicated by everyone. Whether it was via song or sermon, the radio industry had a

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[27] Martin, *Preaching on Wax*, 139.

[28] Julie Kennedy, "The Forgotten 'Phonograph Preachers,'" *The Source, Washington University in St. Louis,* December 8, 2014, https://source.wustl.edu/2014/12/the-forgotten-phonograph-preachers/.

pointed investment in the most financially rewarding communication. There was also the autonomy of the radio industry to only play what it wanted others to hear.

What was helpful to the African American community was that phonographs were more prevalent than radio. Very few African Americans had a radio in the home during this era, but most had a phonograph. Also, phonographs did not require electricity.[29] Although African Americans were not given the same access via radio as their counterparts, the phonograph still proved beneficial for those who sought to have recorded preaching in their homes. This access is also available today and has experienced an even more modern pivot than the previously acknowledged technology of MP3s. Today's recordings are available via platforms such as Apple iTunes and Google Play.

Considering each of these platforms and other streaming services that include mediums like Spotify, believers can access older and recent presentations of the gospel. Some platforms have an electronic version of the Holy Bible. These platforms provide an interactive space in which God's word is communicated to individuals on a local level and to those who will hear it around the world.

The shifts in technology continue to have a lasting impact on how the gospel is presented to the world. The shifts from oral traditions to technology, though perhaps hesitantly and cautiously accepted by some, should not overshadow the reality of its effectiveness. Even where the selfish gain has permeated the communication of the gospel, there is still value in the sincerity of those men and women who make conscious choices to first and foremost ensure that the message of hope can reach beyond the walls

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[29] Kennedy, "The Forgotten 'Phonograph Preachers,'" https://source.wustl.edu/2014/12/the-forgotten-phonograph-preachers/.

of the church and one specific generation. Interactions between the youth and older adults

provide a natural and socially healthy mechanism for the mutual exchange of knowledge,

values, and skills which have been shown to significantly benefit both populations.[30]

What is abundantly clear is that pivots among intergenerational groups that invited them

to embrace digital spaces have been occurring for decades. This is not a new concept for

any church. No matter the ethnic or racial makeup of a congregation, this has been a part

of shifting world and church cultures.

Several formal research studies have brought to light the need for connectivity

between ages. The characteristics of digital connectivity vary, but the need for digital

connectivity cannot be ignored. A primary motivation for participants to use technology

was as a "digital gathering place" to communicate with family, especially adult children

and grandchildren, and friends.[31] This study suggests that the younger generation taught

the older generation how to connect and engage in a digital way. The Covid-19 pandemic

corroborated this idea, as many families chose not to gather in one space as the threat of a

deadly virus still loomed. These precautions also translated to local worship spaces.

Furthermore, to keep down the spread of Covid-19, many houses of worship

chose the apparent alternative of digital connectedness that came in the form of live

streaming. Though some churches were not fully prepared for such a spontaneous pivot,

eventually, most churches embraced the digital space to continue to connect with

members of their congregations. It became the role and desire of many young believers to

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[30] Jennifer Boger and Kathryn Mercer, "Technology for Fostering Intergenerational Connectivity: Scoping Review Protocol," *Systematic Review* 6, no. 250 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-017-0652-y.

[31] Shannon Freeman et al., "Intergenerational Effects on the Impacts of Technology Use in Later Life," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 16 (2020): 5711, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17165711.

assist older believers in the pivot. Because of this, multiple generations were able to interact and connect for the explicit purpose of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Specifically, among places of worship, the prominence of the phonograph depended on those willing to accept the shifts in the development of technologies that impacted sound. Embracing those shifts proved to benefit to the world. While some may pervert the use of technologies, the use of these various technologies is still helpful to the cultures and communities of the world. Consolidated Baptist Church, like other worshipping congregations, realized how quickly pivots in secular life can occur and their effects on the worshipping congregation. Consolidated Baptist Church must not run the risk of being left behind when the next pivot is necessary. This can be avoided by embracing the digital pivot that is currently among this congregation.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

An acceptance of the Great Commission is an acceptance of communication. Jesus gives this command to his disciples in Matthew chapter twenty-eight, ultimately to all who lay claim to his name and the work of salvation, including an inescapable reality of communication with others. Still, before the command to communicate the gospel on a lateral level was provided, there was one who communicated to humanity on a vertical level. The communication from heaven to earth was the very first communication of the gospel. This must be acknowledged, emphasized, and understood.

Communication in history began with God, who so lovingly chose to create and communicate with humankind. In essence, communication on any level and in any way began with the sovereign God. "Then God said." This phrase permeates the creation story in Genesis chapter one. As he advanced it at every point of creation, this phrase, "then God said," preceded it. Even in the second account of creation, as God makes man, he decides that man must have a companion lest man should be alone. Before an articulate desire, man is not be alone because the Bible says, "and the Lord God said."

God even communicates with humanity prior to the fall as they peruse the Garden of Eden. He has communicated to form creation and soon will communicate with creation to provide it with his desires for them and how they must follow these desires. Moreover, the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "of every tree of the garden you may freely

eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17, NKJV). The communication with humanity is evident. The communication is concise. Still, humanity would inevitably ignore that communicated desire.

The very essence of humanity's dilemma was in desperate need of a communicator. Once Adam and Eve and essentially all of humanity fell out of fellowship with God, the centuries-old struggle to communicate with God required a mediator. Communication with God required someone worthy of being in God's presence to communicate on sinful humanity's behalf. The Old Testament is permeated with humanity, who practiced the command of holiness to have access to communicate with a Holy God and to a Holy God on behalf of God's people. Still, this was not enough.

God's subsequent communication with humanity comes through the embodiment of Jesus Christ. God offers humanity the opportunity to have right fellowship with him, and that can only come through Jesus. He communicates a loving message to his creation by offering us his Son, an extension of him. God demonstrated his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). This demonstration ultimately communicates that although disappointed and furious with humanity at times, God still loves his creation. The love of God is essentially what is communicated through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The love of God is communicated as he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life (Jn. 3:16).

As the Son would give up his life for humanity but must return to the Father until his second coming, Heaven once again provides ways to communicate with humanity.

Through the word of God, the Bible, the will of God is consistently communicated to humanity as all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. The Father also provides a way for humanity to communicate with heaven as Jesus is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us (Rom. 8:34). Not only has humanity been blessed to experience communication through the word of God, but humanity has the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that likewise speaks to the hearts, minds, spirits, and souls of those who have opened their hearts to receive him.

Essentially, communication, as given by the Creator, is holy. God uses communication to express his will to humanity. As humanity would fall, God still chose to communicate with it. Eventually, God would send Jesus to communicate his plan of salvation. As humanity is now, Jesus left the word of God, centuries-old, with his creation to continue communicating with them. Still, the holiness of God's communication does not rest at the communication of the gospel shared between those who already know who Jesus is.

Since a systematic and progressive approach to communication was holy *to* God, perhaps this speaks to the type and nature of communication that must exist *about* God. The communication about God comes in the form of evangelism. Essentially, evangelism seeks to communicate the love of God to make disciples. As we have been commissioned to participate in spreading the gospel, the command to "abide and go," cannot be ignored. Michael Gorman suggests that humanity is called to participate in the witnessing of God and does so with a missional hermeneutic. This witnessing is grounded in three

theological assumptions: 1) That God, who is love, is missional and therefore has a mission, the Missio Dei; 2) That scripture bears witness to God's mission, and 3) That the church is called and sent to participate in that mission in God-like, or God-shaped ways.[1]

Gorman suggests that humanity must take part in the commandment given by God, the commandment of abide and go. The command to abide and go requires humankind to communicate the will of God, for humanity, with other people. In understanding Systematic Theology, seeing theology as the logos of thesis helps complete the work of witnessing about God. It is the ideas or the discourse about God.[2] Discourse about God cannot just be passive but must always accompany the mission that has been assigned to those who believe in God.

Communicating the message of hope and the message of Christ is not new to humanity. The church communicated its message initially through word of mouth, then they recorded it on goat skins, which then evolved to printed paper, then to computers, handheld devices, and more recently, software and the internet.[3] As stated before, even technology such as the phonograph, radio, and television have been used to spread and share the message of salvation with humanity. Still, there are times when the mediums of how the gospel is shared are criticized and more than that they are met with much resistance. Many worry that the gospel's message would be muddied by a greater interest in optics and crowds versus making disciples. For many in ministry, digital technology has been a burden. The issue is not a big-church, small-church issue. Many believe that

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[1] Michael Gorman, *Abide and God* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 2-3.

[2] James W. McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 21.

[3] Natchi Lazarus, *The Connected Church* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Publishing, 2017), 306.

churches of all shapes and sizes are falling headlong into the trap of relevance at all costs, digitizing and technologizing anything and everything they can.[4] This has been the sentiment of several congregations as they have felt that digital technology has been more valued than discipleship.

Truthfully, their perspectives are respected, realizing that in some cases, Christianity has experienced its shift in what it means to be Christian. The gospel in some spaces has been traded for motivational speaking that creates membership over discipleship. In what Kim refers to as the Analog Church, the church has a way of maintaining its message via the measures that are currently in place.[5] Though seemingly outdated to some, an appreciation for these measures and structures should always be present. What if grandma's church had some things right? It is easy to criticize and quickly dismiss the pipe organ, choir gowns, and oversized pulpits as antiquated relics of the past.[6] The truth is that the message of Christ has been manipulated by many for selfish gain as digital technology has progressed, and this scenario is not entirely avoidable from any structure. As long as sin abounds, humanity will callously use divinely assigned abilities to create and manipulate ideas that should only be used to edify God's people and glorify the Creator.

In this same vein, work does not seek to call for the elimination or dismissal of the relics of the Analog Church. This work likewise does not seek to diminish the concerns of the Analog Church. The concerns of those who are cautious and even afraid

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[4] Jay Y. Kim, *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 149.

[5] Kim, *Analog Church*, 129.

[6] Kim, *Analog Church*, 129.

to introduce and/or embrace a digital communicative and connective structure in their worship spaces have well-received and legitimate concerns and sometimes grievances. Though there are concerns for both structures, there must be a simultaneous appreciation for the Analog and the Digital Church. However, both have necessary places in forging evangelism, discipleship, and connectivity among those in the church and those with their eyes on the church.

This chapter does seek to raise and even create a heightened awareness of the times the church is currently. What is among us cannot be ignored by us. It is likewise imperative to remember the sons of Issachar, and as they understood their times, our current world is in a heightened digital age. The gospel does not cease to be communicated because platforms are foreign to the communicator or the listener. In scriptures and throughout history, we see how the church has adapted itself and learned to use the relevant media of the age to communicate the love of God.[7] This age is no different. As a matter of fact, the opportunities available to reach others via digital platforms have endless possibilities.

According to the National Congregations Study 2018-2019, the statistics of digital use via smartphones includes the following: 53% of congregations use their smartphones to access scripture, 29% record church service, 16% connect with the church over social media, 15% donate money, 13% engage with the sermon, and 5% interact with music.[8] These statistics were seen in a pre-pandemic world. This data is relative to a time when digital engagement and use were not being so emphasized. Imagine the elevation in these

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[7] Lazarus, *The Connected Church*, 306.

[8] Eric Ferreri, "Going to Church? Bring Your Smartphone," *Duke Today*, Duke University, October 19, 2020, https://today.duke.edu/2020/10/going-church-bring-your-smartphone.

numbers as the entire world is affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. As the coronavirus began to spread and social distancing guidelines emerged, most of the church quickly provided digital options. March 2020, Lifeway Research found that 92% of Protestant pastors said they provided some type of video sermons or worship services online. That number climbed to 97% in April 2020.[9]

Even in a near possible post-pandemic reality, the use of digital spaces is not likely to wane. As Consolidated Baptist Church has experienced, along with other congregations, many regularly attending congregants and even those who periodically attend worship have fully embraced the digital shift in church worship and likely prefer it over in-person worship. Consolidated Baptist Church has seen both realities in one congregation. This translates to the need for a permanent digital embrace that allows the entire congregation to connect for worship consistently.

The effects of the pandemic will continue to linger and have already established new norms for churchgoers and church leaders alike. Pew Research Center found that 92% of people who regularly attend religious services expected to continue at the same or higher rate, while 7% say they will attend in-person services less often.[10] Essentially, there is a group of congregants that just will not return to the physical worship space. All congregations can expect a percentage of their weekday attendance to wane in the wake of digital availability. This will be true for most congregations, and the percentage of those who will not return will vary by congregation, so these numbers are not one-size-

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[9] Aaron Earls, "Nearly Half in U.S. Watched Church Online During Pandemic," *Lifeway Research*, Baptist Standard, October 18, 2021, https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/faith-culture/nearly-half-in-u-s-watched-church-online-during-pandemic/.

[10] David Sharp, "Millions Skipped Church During Pandemic. Will They Return?," *Associated Press News*, June 29, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-pandemics-lifestyle-health-religion-cd5fbac2318cb58e1d5ec4a5d1c00ecc.

fits-all, and it will depend on the time. It is not the moment to callously abandon what God has so divinely blessed his church with, as it has well-served the church in times past. It is also not the time to see a shift that impacts not just church membership, but ultimately the Great Commission commanded of us simply because of the platform that it must come through. There must be an embrace of the digital age.

Emphasizing the power of an in-person experience should never cease. While church members and anyone interested in worship should not be brow-beaten to attend worship, they should be reminded of the fellowship of believers. There is indeed something good and pleasant for brethren to dwell together in unity (Psalm 133:1)! With this reality, what becomes of the disciple who chooses not to return to the physical space?

At the end of Babylonian captivity, Ezra chapter one details King Cyrus' edict to have Israel go back to Jerusalem where the temple of God would be built. The Bible communicates that only a certain percentage of Jews went back to Jerusalem. Some of them did not go back because they did not want to, and others were physically unable to return. Could the same considerations be made for individuals of today's society? The culture of perspectives includes those who choose not to return and those who may be physically unable to return because they may be immune-compromised or may be experiencing some other issue that prevents them from being physically present in the sanctuary for worship.

Still, the question remains, what becomes of all individuals who choose to attend in person or who choose to stay home. Does the gospel not reach them because they are unable or unwilling to make a physical return? Perhaps what should be considered is that the gospel is not simply relegated to the four walls of the church's sanctuaries. The

command "abide and go" takes the gospel to the "hedges and highways" of the world for all to hear!

Having a proper understanding or definition of Digital Theology is helpful as the church must understand the importance of engaging in digital technology. The perspective of Digital Theology is that of a given faith and its intellectual conceptualization as a digital representation. The viewpoint of Digital Theology focuses on an expression of faith, as do the classic fields of Christian theology, conveying faith as various forms of information.[11]

Essentially, Digital Theology differs in the expression of theology. An expressed theology comes in many forms, and the church was just as cautious with the theology expressed in the rap genre. For many church constituents, rap did not belong in the sacred church. That expression was too forward and too radical for many. Still, others saw the creativity and thoughtfulness of God that he would allow the theological perspective of an individual to be expressed in what many consider an extreme way. The expressed theology may only be considered extreme among certain groups because of their introduction or affiliation of an expression they have decided only belongs in a certain space.

At its simplest, technology, according to the theology of cultural mandate, is, in Freeman Dyson's words, "the gift of God. After the gift of life itself, it is perhaps the greatest of God's gifts. It is the mother of civilizations of arts and sciences."[12] Indeed,

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[11] Erkki Sutinen and Anthony-Paul Cooper, *Digital Theology: A Computer Science Perspective* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021), 221.

[12] Matthew T. Prior, *Confronting Technology: The Theology of Jacques Ellul* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020), 232.

God is the creator of science itself. Man does not have the gift of science apart from the creator of science. Undoubtedly, the greatest gift from God came in the form of Jesus. Still, it is quite appropriate to view science as a gift of God. Science in its purest form can certainly be appreciated by all who are willing to engage with it.

Most would not pair the reality of computer science and theology as they seem antithetical, particularly those who belonged to the Lord's church. For centuries, those in sciences and theological studies sparred as it related to the presence of either concept at any time. The historical disdain of science is troubling because faith and science do not have to be at odds with one another. As long as faith is understood to be the foundation and leader of the two, it can be appreciated better.

Within computer science, we approach Digital Theology from the perspective of interactive design, how to devise technologies that enhance and enrich the encounter and mutual understanding between people, rather than between a computer and its user.[13] An informed science recognizes that God gives all knowledge, and that science can serve faith. Science serves faith in Digital Theology cosmos as it assists with the expression of faith on a digital platform. These spaces of expression include social media, radio, television, phone applications, and more. It is likely that many who oppose a digital shift for purposes of connectivity between congregants of all ages have likewise already been privy to and use technology and faith simultaneously.

There is a very critical reason why the church must engage in a digital culture. It is simply that the mission of the church also happens through digital spaces. Ignoring the fact that the abide and go command happens via digital platforms is by nature dismissive

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[13] Sutinen, *Digital Theology*, 291.

and ultimately callous. Fellowship among believers is not a concept that remains optional

to the believer. The faith of a follower cannot be brought to full maturity in a space of

isolation. This means that for faith to grow, one must interact with others if that faith is to

be proven. Faith is done in community with others, which means that digital spaces allow

believers to worship, serve, and grow in the community. At its core, a church is a

community of people who gather to worship.[14] This community is not relegated to one

space or platform to be the church community.

Consequently, not engaging people as they communicate digitally with the church

is today's equivalent of ignoring people as they knock on the church's front doors.[15]

Where the church sees a need, the church must have a desire to meet the need. What is

crucial to consider is the one who desires digital engagement in ministry, specifically if

they have yet to come into relationship with Christ, and even for those who already have

a relationship with him, to ignore their presence in a digital space is damaging. The truth

is, there was also a way that Christ found the believer who does not desire to worship or

engage in the digital space.

Therefore, where Christ finds an individual, is the very place where he makes a

conscious choice to minister to the individual. Saul was found in the space of persecuting

Christians in the name of God. The location of Zacchaeus was not in a temple or

synagogue, but Christ found him in a tree. The woman caught in adultery was not found

in a physical worship space but among those who sought her death and demise. There are

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[14] Mark Crosby, *So Everyone Can Hear: Communicating Church in a Digital Culture* (London, UK: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge Publishing, 2019), 146.

[15] Phil Bowdle, *Rethink Communication: A Playbook to Clarify and Communicate Everything in Your Church* (Los Angeles, CA: Center for Church Communication, 2019), 40.

countless others whose stories could be told about how the gospel of Jesus Christ came to them. Though this is a digital age, the concept remains the same. The abide and go mission is not to be dismissed because the believer is not in favor of the location. Jonah knew this all too well.

What has plagued the church for some time is the concept that the church's mission and ministry have somehow turned inward. Week after week, songs are sung, prayers are prayed, sermons are preached, only for the benefit of those who sit within the walls of the church. The question remains, what happens to the ones who never come into the church space? This interior and selfish practice of ministry that only serves those within the walls of the church is antithetical to what Christ has commanded his disciples to do. The church has left the building.[16]

There are two aspects that exist: those who are being made into disciples and those who have the potential to become disciples. For those who have already accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the ministry does not cease at the moment of salvation, and the mission of being made into disciples must continue with those individuals as well. The church does not have the option of not engaging with those who know Christ simply because of location and the platform these individuals choose to hear of him and learn about him. For those who know Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior, the gospel must be communicated to them. There is no space for either of these groups to come into the knowledge of Jesus Christ and grow in that knowledge, only according to what is considered a traditional way of delivering the gospel.

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[16] Nona Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 11.

It is not an exact science. Every church needs to adapt communications to its own culture and context, but the fundamental principles rarely change. Individuals hear and receive messages in different ways, and it is our job to make it possible for all to know what is being said, so everyone can hear and ultimately share the good news of God.[17] One reality that the church often dismisses, or overlooks, is the sharing of the gospel in digital spaces.

Nevertheless, social media has become a place where sharing the gospel is literally a click away. For use on Facebook, the share button is readily available. Users are able to share to their personal pages, to other public pages, through direct messaging, and on other social media sites such as Instagram, all with the proper permissions. The same concept is available to users on Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter, and even on more professional digital spaces such as LinkedIn. The church that continues to resist may not realize the magnitude of the gospel being shared by digital platforms. The spreading of the gospel is not a mandate that simply belongs to those who attend worship in a building, but the message, mission, and method must leave the building!

For many of those in the church who oppose digital ministry, the perspective is already being done to provide ministry to others. Truthfully, those methods are indeed necessary. Having a church pantry, having a church prayer line, having toy drives for those affected by family members who are incarcerated, marriage ministry retreats, children's festivals, this list could go on and on. Still, having these aspects of ministry available digitally is just as important. People do not just need a roof over their heads; they also need a purpose for life and strong relationships.

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[17] Crosby, *So Everyone Can Hear*, 174.

Healthy churches have a vision from God that provides both direction and community. Vision is a picture of a preferred future. Values are the foundations of why you do what you do.[18] In essence, the values by which the church operates are biblical and are not abandoned as it seeks to engage a digital culture. The values of the church are not lost because the church chooses to create intergenerational connectedness via digital spaces. The value of the local church may even drastically increase among the culture because the church has agreed to take a Christ-led approach in embracing digital culture. This Christ-led approach to embracing is marked by the purpose for connectedness remaining spiritual.

As a digital marketing executive, Brett Henderson has consulted with ministry leaders internationally to help lead them into the digital ministry age. Brett's findings concerning the digital space are paramount: 22,900 people ask Google, "Who is Jesus" every month. That is equivalent to one search every two minutes. Another 13,000 people each month want to know if Jesus is real. Every thirty seconds, someone on Google asks, "what is the meaning of life?" This adds up to 90,500 searches every month.[19] This information does not serve as a license for believers or potential believers to never engage in the physical worship space again. It has already and long been established that a digital platform can never replace the physical worship space and face-to-face interaction and connectivity.

In fact, this information details that there is a need for the church to be present in digital spaces. Why? Because there is a hunger that exists to know more about God.

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[18] Crosby, *So Everyone Can Hear*, 174.

[19] Brett Henderson, *The Digital Ministry: Reaching the Ends of the Earth Without Leaving Home* (Seattle, WA: Kindle Direct Publishing, 2021), 21.

Perhaps those asking these questions are simply wanting to prove the perspective of the church wrongly. There are individuals in the world who exist to do just that. This will never leave from among us. Likewise, there is a group of people who have yet to come into salvation but are seeking answers about salvation from those who despise the work of salvation. It then becomes problematic that the church would refuse to engage in the digital space when one of the needs of the world is to have the church in this space. There are questions that must be answered, and they do not all make it to the physical church building.

Believers can ultimately connect through virtual spaces with one another and with those who do not yet believe. Though some digital spaces may seem to manufacture pretentious relationships online, and this does indeed happen, there are connections forged through digital platforms that are organic and thriving. Not everyone who is in the digital space is inauthentic. Even where there are imposters and those who create spam to disrupt those connections, digital protections have been put in place, and precautions can be taken to limit the reoccurrence of fraudulent and inauthentic connectedness.

In the vein of connectedness, the idea of social media is that it is an internet-based form of communication. Social media platforms allow users to have conversations, share information, and create web content. There are many forms of social media, including blogs, micro-blogs, wikis, social networking sites, photo-sharing sites, instant messaging, video-sharing sites, podcasts, widgets, virtual worlds, and more.[20] This is primarily about a means of communication. Social media allows messages to be carried, without

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[20] University of South Florida, "Introduction to Social Media | University Communications and Marketing," University of South Florida, 2019, https://www.usf.edu/ucm/marketing/intro-social-media.aspx.

boundaries, to all people or all nations, at any given time. This must be reflected in the church's mission, a desire to communicate the message of salvation, without the boundaries, to all people who will listen at any given time.

Social media not only offers the sharing of communication but also fosters relationships among others through thoughts, beliefs, and ideas. Indeed, there are times when poor relationships are fostered or generated in digital spaces. Many have become adversaries due to online engagement, but this stems from the original intent of both parties who have engaged. Still, the connections can be positively created. Church leader and author Nona Jones knows this all too well. Rhetorically she asks, "how is it possible that a person who has not darkened the door of our church in months or years could still view me as their leader?"[21] The answer is simple, technology. One previously had to attend a worship service to participate in the worship and hear the message, but now live streaming has allowed people to stay connected with a local church despite being unable to physically attend or choosing not to because they have more important things to do, such as sleep in.[22]

In this digital age, many individuals have attributed the title "online pastor" to those church leaders they have connected to virtually. The meaning of the pastor has not changed, and neither has the role. The location of the pastor has been adjusted only for the benefit of spreading the gospel and creating digital connectedness. Those individuals who deem leaders to be their online pastors have relationships with pastors and leaders that parallel or mirror the experience of being in the physical space. Again, this is not a

[21] Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry*, 11.

[22] Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry*, 11.

total abandonment of face-to-face contact with other believers. It is, however, another means to connect with online users and proof of how relationships can be created in the digital space and how relationships should be created in the digital space.

Digital platforms engage believers and non-believers alike to forge relationships in digital spaces and create a method of discipleship in those spaces. It also can eventually pull the person who initially engaged digitally to the physical worship space. The common thread driving churches' Instagram use is the goal of maximizing in-person attendance at upcoming events.[23] In essence, the church communicates opportunities for worship via digital platforms. Whereas the original ask, by word of mouth, the occasional paper flyer, or the radio, newspaper, community bulletin sufficed for inviting people to worship worked, now the digital platform does the same. Many worship opportunities, ministry opportunities, and fellowship opportunities are made available via social media networks. As a result of these invitations in a digital space, digital engagement is often created.

Likewise, those who extend these invitations tap into believer's creativity through the ways in which they invite others to worship, fellowship, and minister with the church. For the visual person, having an invitation to worship in the form of a video is also helpful because they have someone who seems to be making a personable approach to invite them to worship. Creativity is tapped into whether the video is comedic or dramatic, and the results can be extremely positives. The church can gauge the effects of this approach by social media analytics, and the numbers do not lie.

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[23] Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry*, 42.

Analytics are offered on social media platforms often. Just as the platforms need to know what works and what does not work, the church must take the same approach to the social media ministry. Paying attention to impressions, views, and much more can help the church determine the best use of their time in the digital space. Perhaps for the church, frustration and skepticism in the digital space could be kept at a minimum or even at bay if church leaders would see the benefit in using these analytics. There is analytics to track followers, social media mentions, post impressions, and media conversions. Tracking followers can lead to seeing the growth of various followers. Social media mentions can help the church understand how people are engaging with their digital platform. Post impressions reveal how a post is seen so that the church may know the best times to attempt engagement with those in the digital space.

Ultimately, if the church learned to embrace believers and non-believers alike to accept their financial engagement to the church, then the church must also engage with people spiritually in digital spaces. For the church to only accept financial engagements on digital platforms is antithetical to the mission of the church. This makes ministry, through the church, transactional instead of relational. Christ's mission must and will continue to go forth in the world. Consolidated Baptist Church must be willing to be a consistent part of this mission.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

When looking at the state of the church, you will quickly realize that many churches struggle with finding ways to communicate with their parishioners. When congregations lack consistent communication in the church, it causes both a decline in attendance and participation from people within the congregation. The problem is that there is an old and existing paradigm of communication that has proven to be harmful to the growth and development of the Lord's church. Furthermore, though lacking communication affects congregations, a treatment for that ailment in the church exists. The treatment is in the form of the transformational and biblical communication model. These different models can aid the church by helping it to shift and provide answers to the problem that the church faces. The ideas found in these models will produce change, which, if followed, can transform a suffering congregation so that she might fulfill her calling in excellence.

In essence, the proper way for the church to address this issue is through the vehicle of two-way communication. This brings about change and produces growth to churches and small groups during a global pandemic and a world that is ever changing through the evolution of advanced technology. Knowing that the church lacks a message

problem is important; the church has a message delivery problem.[1] To that end, the

communication problem plagues the church.[2] In fact, poor communication prevents the

church from fulfilling the greatest commandment that Christ instructed her to fulfill – the

Great Commission. Prior to his departure, Christ in Matthew 28:19 calls all disciples to

"Go into the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation."[3] The church must

realize that she has a life-changing message to share that in her community that can bring

with it life-changing opportunities. The great news about the issues that the church faces

around communication is that God has provided new opportunities to go and proclaim the

message.[4]

Trying to birth change of this magnitude in any organization comes with inevitable

barriers and challenges throughout the process. One thing the pandemic has shown many

churches is that change is not easy. Richard S. Ascough and Charles A. Cotton would

agree when they state, "It is not easy being caught up in a major transformational era;

anyone who has tried to change mindsets in an organizational culture, or make a merger

work seamlessly know that."[5] Therefore, instituting a communication playbook that will

work to reimagine communication within the church would be an asset in the effort to

develop stronger churches. This interdisciplinary foundation will examine the structure of

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[1] Phil Bowdle, *Rethink Communication: A Playbook to Clarify and Communicate Everything in Your Church* (Los Angeles, CA: Center for Church Communication, 2019), 16.

[2] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 18.

[3] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 17.

[4] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 17.

[5] Richard S. Ascough and Charles A. Cotton, *Passionate Visionary: Leadership Lessons from the Apostle Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 26.

communication in its many intricacies to further support the importance of the overall

hypothesis of improving communication to advance the proclamation of the gospel.

Christianity as Communication

As the church works to redevelop communication, the church must understand

that Christianity is communication and that it is God's tool to communicate to humanity.

In fact, one can comprehend Christianity as a religion of communication.[6] Johannes

Heinrichs and Avery Dulles and many others proposed this same idea.[7] Also, it is

important to highlight and understand that the Christian Trinitarian view of God is

dialogical for the first time in history, which suggests the use of conversation or shared

dialogue to explore the meaning of something. In the context of church, communication

within the church helps members and participants to engage in community and

conversation that helps participants explore of the meaning of God and God's precepts.

Furthermore, the doctrine of the incarnation shows that God is self-loving and always

was communicative toward creation and humankind. Some scholars would even argue

that the doctrine of redemption happens through a communication process. Through this

communication process one can maintain a sense of identity, and self-awareness. Also,

through this communicative process one learns what it means to interact and contribute to

society. Lastly, the essential Christian message is communicated through preaching by

word and deed, which helps to communicate God's message of love.[8]

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[6] Johannes Heinrichs, "Theory of Practical Communication: A Philosophical and Christian Approach," *Communications* 12, no. 3 (1986): 7-26, https://doi.org/10.1515/comm.1986.12.3.7.

[7] Avery Dulles, "The Church and the Media," *Catholic Mind* 69, no. 1256 (October 1971): 6-16.

[8] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 17.

The Church as Communication

According to Avery Dulles, all of creation is potentially a mediator of divine disclosure, but the church is the community that possesses the greatest potential for communication about God.[9] Dulles also states that "The Church exists in order to bring men into communion with God and thereby to open them up to communication with each other."[10] More specifically, communication is needed to complete various tasks such as mission, evangelism, or education. Communication not only helps the church understand more of who God is, but it helps the church understand where their parishioners are. Meaning that communication helps church leaders understand where members are emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. This is important, especially during the climate that we are living in currently. During a time of a pandemic, it is important for church leaders to know the well-being of their members so that they can offer services to meet their needs.

One important factor that will help persons to understand church as method of communication is understanding the intersection of church and culture. Many argue that the apprehension of God is a consistently recurring and a renewed experience, and the distinction between reaching non-Christians versus nurturing Christians is always inexact and elusive.[11] In fact, one must deny the notion that the church deals with the sacred while the secular elements of culture deal only with the non-sacred. Church and culture

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[9] Dulles, "The Church and the Media," 6-16.

[10] Dulles, "The Church and the Media," 6-16.

[11] Dulles, "The Church and the Media," 6-16.

are bound together. They are nearly inseparable and coexist. Dulles writes that "The substance of culture is religion, and the form of religion is culture."[12]

Dulles also suggests that wherever there is an apprehension and participation in God's revelation, there exists the church. This means that the church community and its communication exist in places not normally considered by society to be the church.[13] Generationally, this is important. During a period where there are many ways to communicate both in person and digitally, it is important that churches understand how much culture plays a part in how young adults and youth view and hear the message of the church. This shows how critical it is for church to have media ministries. This alone proves why communication is so vital to the body of Christ, especially during a season and culture where the world is dependent on communication. Also, that which calls itself the church often fails to fulfil the role of church, namely, to be as pure of a channel of communication about God as possible.[14]

The situation of effective communication leads the church into a paradox, which leaves the question: how can it be the most effective and 'pure' channel of communication without falling into the corruption or risk being ineffective? All the church can do is attempt to be as faithful as possible in its faltering communication attempts, and then place itself under the same judgment that it uses to judge the rest of society. While communication is a vital part of the church, it is important that churches communicate in a way that is healthy for them and the audience they are communicating.

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[12] Dulles, "The Church and the Media," 6-16.

[13] Dulles, "The Church and the Media," 6-16.

[14] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 37.

Additionally, it is important that church communication efforts are transformational, yet careful and strategic.

Bowdle believes that transforming communication in this manner requires developing a ministry of communication. In other words, the church must begin rethinking the role of communication in the church. He also argues that for too long, too many churches saw communication as a service department instead of a ministry.[15] Currently, the role of communication in many churches are treated as a fifteen-minute oil change service department. Bowdle provides this illustration,

> The role of communication is treated like 15-minute oil change service department. 'Here's my message. Here's what I want you to do with it. Here's what I want it look like. Go promote it as quickly as you can, to as many people as you can, as cheaply as you can.[16]

Utilizing communication in this manner robs members and volunteers of what God has told them to do. More specifically, the church turned creative missionaries into mindless automations. It is important that the church understand that efforts towards communications should be consistently evolving.

Furthermore, the church must understand that which God instructed God's servant to do and how God equipped them. Exodus 31:6 states "And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you." The church must understand that God gave ability to all the skilled workers to make everything that God commanded of them. Through communication, the church has the opportunity to achieve that greatest commandment that Christ has instructed her to do,

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[15] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 62.

[16] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 62.

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen (Mt. 28:19-20).

While many churches work to take advantage of this amazing opportunity, many of them miss opportunities. Many churches are caught in what Bowdle describes as the "Chaos Cycle." Bowdle says that the following symptoms hold churches back from effective communication, "Constantly overwhelmed keeping up with task, lack of margin for creativity, reactive workflow instead of proactive planning, working behind schedule, everything comes together as the last minute, no time to create systems and processes."[17] Communication helps the church to mobilize preaching, teaching, evangelism, small groups, and even counseling and visits with the pastor.

Two Way Communication

The model that will address the issues of lack of communication in the church is two-way communication. In essence, for an organization to have success, sometimes it must do something that is new and innovative. In his book, *Rethink Communication*, Phil Bowdle explains a new reality of communication that should exist within the church.[18] He writes that change is inevitable and is necessary. In addition to stating that this reality should include attendance, engagement, and attention. Bowdle outlines the components of what each ministry playbook should include: "Clarify your message, Craft your elevation pitch, Brainstorm creative ideas, Develop your communication plan, Execute

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[17] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 72.

[18] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 8.

your plan, Evaluate the results."[19] Before developing a communication playbook, it is

important to strategically ask the following questions: "What's a message your church

communicated last week?" "What was your process for communicating that message?"

"Was your communication effective?"

Clarify Your Message

Bowdle believes that clarifying your message begins with asking the right

questions instead of assuming you already have the right answers. The questions that

Bowdle proposes are: "Who is your target audience?" "What's the win for your

message?" "What are the barriers to your message?"[20] These questions are simple but

provide powerful insight because they force you to abandon any assumptions you may

make about the message. To improve communication within the church, the church

should know to whom they desire to talk, what they want them to take away, and what

challenges may prevent the message from going forward.

To clarify your message, you should also identify the win. You should notice the

attendance pattern in your communication. Knowing that the entire communication

process from beginning to end should be about accomplishing the win of your message is

important.[21] Furthermore, knowing the win of your message will help you better know

how to aim at the target. To improve communication, the church should know the win for

the church, the target audience, and the shared win for the audience and the church. This

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[19] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 67.

[23] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 69.

[21] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 85.

information will help media ministries develop a communication strategy that accomplish the overall goal of the message. The strategy helps the church identify what they want to accomplish, the problem they try to solve, and the purpose and objective that they try to reach. One example of how to use this strategy is through small groups. Clarifying your message helps you to accomplish communicating a message about small groups. Lastly, identify the barriers to making the message clear. Bowdle states that sometimes barriers can exist between you and the audience, you, and the win, or the audience and the win.[22]

Benjamin Franklin said "If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail."[23] Bowdle suggests that the communication play book will help to create a proactive communication plan to deliver a clear and effective message.[24] Bowdle said in order to be successful at developing your communication plan you follow two steps, the first of which is to choose the best ideas for communicating your message and the second is to create a list of deliverables.[25] Choosing the best ideas for communicating your message includes choosing ideas that help solve a problem, choosing ideas that you have margin and bandwidth to execute, and choosing ideas that generate the most energy and excitement.[26] Additionally, step two helps to produce and make the idea a reality and it includes in-service moments, videos, social media campaigns, print handouts, and local ads.[27] Both

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[22] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 95.

[23] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 131.

[24] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 130.

[25] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 137.

[26] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 136.

[27] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 137.

of these steps are important to and play a major role in bringing the communication plan to life.

       Lastly, as the church works to improve communication, it is important to identify your target audience and you also want to notice attendance patterns of the congregation. In terms of the virtual platforms, you want to know what times and platforms that members prefer using to tune in to services. Are there any noticed differences with that are easily recognized? For example, does Generation Z prefer a different platform than Baby Boomers? All this information is helpful with identifying the target audience. Additionally, this information will help to identify the best communication channels for engaging your target audience with your message.[28] Bowdle suggests having focus groups and asking members in specific age ranges which platforms they prefer using and adjust from the information that is provided.

Virtual Small Groups

       In addition, birthing a communication playbook and developing a media ministry, another need for the church is a virtual small group. One thing that Covid-19 and the pandemic taught is that community is an essential part of a healthy life. Small groups are one of the tools where members of the church can find a community. For nearly two years, much of the church operated in isolation. Additionally, even before the pandemic, much of the world was busy with the circumstances of life. Both scenarios show meeting face-to-face is not always an option. Small groups are a model that churches can create safe environments for genuine and meaningful connections to happen virtually.

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[28] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 83.

To successfully develop virtual small groups, the church must work to communicate the purpose. This means making sure the group members know why they meet. Are they meeting for a Bible study, for sharing and encouragement, prayer, or something else? This can be done through an email or phone conversation ahead of time or during your first virtual meeting together. Cheryl Boyd provides nine essential steps to consider when leading virtual small groups. They are:

1. Communicate the purpose — Make sure the group members know why you are meeting. Is it for a Bible study? Sharing and encouragement? Prayer? Something else?

   You can do this through an email or phone conversation ahead of time or during your first virtual meeting together.

2. Help them prepare — Send a meeting invitation with a weblink to the meeting in it and explain anything they may need to do to prepare. If you are going to discuss a question or specific content, it will help the group's internal processors to see that ahead of time.

3. Remind them of the meeting — Send out an upbeat email or text reminder within 24 hours of the meeting, along with a word of encouragement.

4. Give technology coaching to those who need it — Some of your group members may not be experienced with virtual meetings. Make sure you get familiar with them yourself, and then let them know they can reach out to get some coaching from you. You could even have a practice run with them before the meeting.

5. Get there early — As the leader of the group, sign on to your preferred platform five minutes before the designated time. This allows you to welcome people as they arrive and act as a host. Smile and look them in the eye (the camera lens). It makes a difference!

6. Begin and end with prayer — This is a great way to center the group and transition from waiting for people to join to actually starting the meeting. Don't forget to speak loudly enough to be heard.

7. End on time — Respect their time. Make sure you end the small group on time each week so those who need to sign off can do so. Others who are able to choose to stay and hang out afterward (you may even want to encourage it).

8. Agree on norms — Knowing what to expect is always reassuring to people, and it helps create a positive environment. When you have a set of norms, it helps everyone have accurate expectations and helps provide accountability that the entire group can own together. Here are some examples of common norms:

   o Confidentiality — What is shared in the group stays in the group.

   o Camera — Everyone will use their camera and keep it on their face during the meeting.

   o Quiet — Everyone will mute their microphones when they are not talking. You will be surprised how loud moving a paper or adjusting your chair can be when your microphone is on.

   o Center — Everyone will stay centered on group participation. We won't multitask! Encourage everyone to turn off notifications for other apps on the device they are using for the meeting.

   o Contribute, don't control — Everyone will participate in the conversation and encourage the participation of others.

   o Connect — In between meetings, everyone will take the initiative to check in on one another. Don't let the small group be the only point of contact.

9. Give and receive grace — Participating in a virtual Bible study will be a new skill for many people. It will be awkward at times. It helps to acknowledge that it may take some getting used to and that you're all in this and learning together.[29]

How Can Groups Meet Online?

The amazing thing about virtual groups is that while online, groups can choose from a variety of meeting formats—video, audio-only, or asynchronously. As with in-person small groups, one size does not fit all for online groups either. Additionally,

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[29] Cheryl Boyd, "Nine Tips on Leading a Virtual Small Group," Cru.org, https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/help-others-grow/leading-small-groups/tips-leading-virtual-small-group.html.

groups meeting via video conferencing platforms offer a multidimensional online group experience. Members can see each other, hear each other's voices, text chat during the meeting, and share a teaching video. While Zoom is very popular, there are several other paid or free services including: GoToMeeting, Webex, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangout, Google Meets, and Facebook Groups among others. Now, in the world of working at home and schooling at home, people have begun to experience Zoom fatigue. Fortunately, if people struggle with Zoom fatigue or are technologically challenged, there are other options.

Audio-Only Group

Audio-only groups meet on a conference line via phone. Free services like freeconferencecall.com are available to anyone who would like to set up a conference line. Typically, these services offer a toll-free number. The only downside of an audio-only group is the inability to see when others are about to speak. Sometimes you get into that stalemate like when you reach a four-way stop: "You go, no you go." But you can learn to yield to others. The leader can ask who has a comment, and then encourage members to start with a short answer like "I do." Then you can call on them and avoid the traffic jam. This option will work perfectly to improve communication to older members. While using platforms such as Zoom, Facebook, or YouTube, a conference call will be easier for them to utilize. It will continue to provide a way for the church to communicate this population of members.

Asynchronous Groups

> Asynchronous groups are simply groups that don't meet at the same time. Which means that the church can offer groups that meet at different times on different days of the week. This will allow the church to have a variety of ways that it communicates to its members. This will increase communication and engagement within the church because Small group members will be able to leave a post in a private Facebook group, send a group text, post a short video on the Marco Polo app or, share a YouVersion reading plan together. By strengthening virtual communication, you also strengthen community. You may not realize, but you use asynchronous groups all the time: text message, email, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other social media. We could even go back to letter writing, but it would take a while for a group to get through a lesson that way.[30]

Asynchronous groups are unique groups that build community within a social and learning environment. One source adds that someone posts a question, and then the group responds when they are able. These groups are great for people who travel or who have odd schedules. They can participate in the group when it is convenient for them. Group leaders or ministry leaders can post questions about the weekly sermon or Bible class to facilitate and moderate the group. Asynchronous groups are also great for people who are new to online groups or joined through your online worship service. Jay Kranda, the online campus pastor at Saddleback Church says, "Private small groups will start off primarily via text-based interactions, move to audio calls after a few weeks, and hopefully turn into regular Zoom or Facebook video calls as trust is built within the group."[31] Every asynchronous group does not need to transition to an audio or video group, but they certainly could move in that direction.

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[30] Allen White, "Online Small Groups: Which Option is Right for Your Church?," SmallGroups.com, smallgroups.com/articles/2020/online-small-groups.html.

[31] White, "Online Small Groups," smallgroups.com/articles/2020/online-small-groups.html.

Digitally Interactive Curriculum

This is another form of asynchronous groups, but with a unique video-based format. Asynchronous groups may sound foreign to the church, but it is just the term for small groups. Small groups and their members login and interact with the video by leaving comments during the video, after the questions, and for each other...Churches can host their own digitally interactive curriculum through the parent technology from a company called Rali. While Rali is used by the secular world and is principally a business platform, but the company has a heart for the church. Rali can be used for small group studies, Bible studies, recorded worship services, membership classes, Growth Track, or any other content you could host online. Members can interact with the content to continue to grow by participating virtually in worship services and other programs and services that the church offers. Additionally, resources such as Rali and work to strengthen communication efforts by serving as a tool that will allow the church to develop online groups. What makes the resources so great is that pastors and church leaders are able to view metrics and see who is using the platform, where they live, what they are interested in, how long they engage with the video, etc.[32] The ability to view the metrics will help the church see if this form of communication is effective for the members.

> During the Coronavirus pandemic, every church in every state is facing different pressures. Only about 30% of churches are meeting in-person and are seeing less than 40% attendance. That means that the way the Church fulfills our mission in the coming months will be different from anything we have ever done. If you are relying on the metrics that gauged your success a year ago, you are probably very depressed right now. Fear of catching Covid-19, fear of spreading it, and fear of being blamed for spreading it at church are keeping most churches closed and keeping people away…This is an era of opportunity. People are tuning into online services that wouldn't darken the door of your church. Millennials are attracted to

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[32] White, "Online Small Groups," smallgroups.com/articles/2020/online-small-groups.html.

online worship services because they can watch the service, and no one is watching them. Another important factor to understand is that many individuals who were not engage in a church prior to Covid-19 are not participating in online services. This is because many individuals who work on Sundays do not have access to service on multiple platforms. Also, some churches did not advance technology to make this service ready for its members until Covid arrives. Churches across the country have become great at developing content, but people also need conversation and community even when they can't meet for in-person services. Online small groups…are a strong solution to this current situation. But it's bigger than this. There are so many benefits to online small groups that go beyond social distancing.[33]

Additionally, as churches work to improve communication and services, it is important that the church investigate developing ways to communicate and offer pastoral care to members online. This is another way the church communicates and for years it has been done in a traditional face to face settings. The arise of Covid-19 has positioned the church to think outside of the box, improve communication, and discover ways to serve members virtually.

Conclusion

In this project, one of the assumptions is that through properly developed communication ministry and plan of cation, the model of digital two-way communication will produce healthy and organic growth. The process of implementing a communication plan to develop a media ministry will launch the church forward with their communication efforts. The church has the amazing opportunity to carry out the greatest commandment that Christ instructed them to do and that is to carry His word forward.

Effective communication is important for the church to reach its members and target audience. To identify the barriers between you and your audience, it is importance

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[33] White, "Online Small Groups," smallgroups.com/articles/2020/online-small-groups.html.

to identify how your audience perceives the church. Therefore, when a church makes a digital communication plan, the church can improve communication in both small groups and the congregation. Phil Bowdle suggests that the average person's attention span is eight seconds.[34] Additionally, Bowdle argues that to fail to engage people as they communicate digitally with the church is today's equivalent of ignoring people as they knock on the front door of your church.[35]

This project assumes that the current leadership of the church is in a state where there is a need for digital two-way communication where members can engage, worship, and connect through social media and other virtual platforms. Phil Bowdle states that "The average person who attends your church may only physically attend eight to ten times a year. The average person your church is trying to communicate with is on social media 116 minutes a day."[36]

Phil Bowdle is correct about the necessary communication shifts that need to happen within the church. With the communication shifts in this culture, churches must both engage people when they attend church physically and as they live their lives throughout the week digitally. This project uses an approach rooted in the biblical text and those resources that speak to effective two-way communication. The project will also use expertise from biblically sound practitioners that will help inform and solidify the project in the areas of communication and the use of social media platforms. Much of that which around this project centers represents what Phil Bowdle calls a "Communication

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[34] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 46.

[35] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 40.

[36] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 41.

playbook."[37] Instead this project will seek to create a space for conversation and instruction about how digital communication is essential to the organization and community life.

At the end of the day, communication is here to stay and as such, churches must develop innovative ways to reach their audiences to ensure that their messages are disseminated, and the people are engaged faithfully in the offerings that are presented. To not do so is to willfully refuse an opportunity to be faithful to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ.

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[37] Bowdle, *Rethink Communication*, 5.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Life, in general, has proven that availability without ability can be a detriment to any institution. What has been incredibly encouraging, throughout the years and even prior to my existence and membership, is that retention has not been an issue for the church. As each person come to access membership at Consolidated Baptist Church, they are introduced to a new family of believers and a community that will go with them as they continue to pursue other life goals. With their membership and support efforts of retention and discipleship, members of Consolidated Baptist Church have also been given other opportunities to learn about and become a part of the culture of the church and Christ through acclimation.

Through membership courses and sources, those who choose to become a part of the family of Consolidated Baptist Church become acclimated to the church. Through a series of spiritual gifts assessments and, more importantly, remaining prayerful for the divine direction of each member, as Christ will lead them, they are supported in discovering their gifts and talents that will support the ministry. This is often something that is not immediately known to the individual. For some members, this is a process of months and for others, it is a process of years. Either way, each member receives and experiences a path to acclimation based on what they feel they were led to do by Christ.

It is important to note that where the members have felt a sense of support and the process of acclimation, they have made themselves available to the work of the ministry at Consolidated Baptist Church. Many of the members and leaders have made it clear that they are available to do the work of the ministry. They give of their time, no matter the season of the year or the season of the church's life, and time that they cannot be returned to them is used on a daily basis. The church has been blessed to do ministry within and outside the walls of the church, and countless hours have been dedicated to that by the membership. They also give of their treasures to ensure that the work of Consolidated Baptist Church can continue in effective ministry. Though the church has been blessed to have been a consistently financially healthy church, I am not naïve to know that this has not happened haphazardly. With the grace and mercy of God and the desire of membership to be faithful to the work of the kingdom, they have given of their financial resources as they have been able and available to do. The members have also been so generous to provide their talents to the church. Where they may have even been less passionate about their talents but most passionate about their gifts, still they have been diligent in providing both. It is because of their generosity, in both ways, that the church has been able to make strides in the progress of ministry as I have seen it.

As wonderful as the availability of the membership and leaders of Consolidated Baptist Church has been, availability is not enough. Having leaders available for ministry can often result in bodies in spaces for poor execution of directives in ministry. It has been on the heart of each pastor and many of the leaders of the church to ensure that as we invite membership to participate in ministry and they make themselves available, they must be equipped to do so. Where we have been able to equip individuals, in house, we

have done so through members who specialize and are gifted to do so in such areas. Where we have not been able to have the equipping needed in the immediate congregation, we have been blessed to reach out among sister-churches for assistance to grow ministry leaders and volunteers—and ultimately the ministry.

We found that where leaders and volunteers have been adequately equipped for ministry, they have been more inclined to participate and invite other members to volunteer, and we have seen retention in membership and in the microcosm of church ministries. Where we have been least diligent in equipping those persons, we have seen poor retention rates at Consolidated Baptist Church. This is likely because leaders or volunteers do not want to be placed in a position where they cannot be successful and effective. As the message of Christ remains the same but methods of articulating and displaying that message evolve, it has been necessary to ensure that those who serve in the various capacities of ministry move with the times. Therefore, it has been imperative that Consolidated Baptist Church take on the responsibility of ensuring that members are placed in the ministry according to their gifts and given space to have those gifts nurtured, even as they continue to serve.

Still, these sentiments can be taken even further. Ability and availability are not enough on their own. It is crucial that communication comes with availability and ability. This has been the crux of my emphasis for this project. The way in which the gospel has been communicated is ever evolving. This made it paramount that the members of Consolidated Baptist Church be trained on what those measures of communication now look like in ministry. As the growth of ministry at Consolidated Baptist Church has been seen throughout its history, it has been important, not only to me but to the entire

leadership, that this growth continues. To be clear, growth is not always easy, but it is necessary and highly possible.

With the adjustments resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, my studies of the gospel and of theology at United Theological Seminary brought to light the training that must happen at Consolidate Baptist Church. The evolution of how scripture has been communicated throughout the history of the church is what prompted such a sense of urgency. I realized that normalcy is a relative term where change is constant. The membership of Consolidated Baptist Church became exhausted with virtual ministry because the assumption was that "normalcy" would return to the local church and the global church as well. We all soon realized that this would not be the case. This could not be the case because the church was no longer able to operate in what was. Consolidated Baptist Church could not afford to miss opportunities for ministry simply because it was exhausted with virtual worship opportunities. It became essential to equip not simply leaders but all members with the tools needed to participate in virtual worship opportunities. Still, such a task had to begin with the leaders of Consolidated Baptist Church, and this is where it all begins.

Methodology

The goal of this work has been to show that where group leaders from Consolidated Baptist Church could be prepared through a focus-group setting to better understand virtual interactions for church engagement and ministry, they would be better equipped to teach others using the tools they have been given. The end is that it would increase the desire and participation of virtual interaction options at Consolidated Baptist

Church moving the church into an even more progressive space. It has been necessary to gauge and garner their participation as the church moves toward consistently embracing the virtual space that is here to stay. Areas where we can effectively reach our leaders, can encourage and involve laity to participate as well.

The methodology of this research brings with understanding the need for qualitative data at Consolidated Baptist Church. If the leaders are going to be gauged and garnered to understand the importance of virtual interactions for communicating the gospel, I first needed to be able to understand what traits and characteristics are important to them – individually and collectively. This qualitative approach also allowed me to see the frequency of this. In order to make this emphasis happen, the data needed to go beyond what is numerical. There was a need for information that could explain any identifiable trends and respond to those trends in a way that would get Consolidated Baptist Church's leaders to understand this necessary shift.

Pressing this point, it was important that the data was not only qualitative but observational. This methodology gave me an opportunity to communicate with leaders in the way that we are currently communicating with the membership of Consolidated Baptist Church – virtually and in person. This did not change the method by which we have been communicating and allowed for authentic and timely reactions to the questions that would supply the necessary data for this research. There were no spontaneous methods of virtual communication used that would alter the current experience of the members. This is crucial to an authentic look into ways that these leaders could be equipped.

It is also important to know that this is observational data with participant observation. I, as the Worship Pastor, was a part of the development of this data. Not changing who was communicating with them, since Consolidated Baptist Church chose to embrace virtual interactions on a more frequent basis was important. It was already clear that creating consistent virtual communication opportunities was something that Consolidated Baptist Church had to acquiesce to in at least the last two years. Because many leaders are still adjusting to this form of communication, not changing the communicator for this area of ministry was just as important.

The pros of having participant observation research begin with understanding the context being studied. I have been at Consolidated Baptist Church since birth, and this is a context I know extremely well. I have also cultivated relationships with all involved. Having the knowledge of the history of the church and the relational capacity with those who were willing to participate in the research was helpful to getting the data needed to assess the best way to equip leaders for virtual interactions. It is likewise helpful that I had a context of the church and context of other participants' level of interaction in ministry as it stands. Having them commit to more than they were willing to in this study would not have been helpful for the results in the data acquired.

Although these pros were present, there were also cons present in these observations. In the participants' observations, the con was the context of the environment and participants. What I did not want to happen with this collection of data is that actions or personalities of the participants would change because of the proximity we all share. I did not want to have any conversations that would alter how participants normally conducted themselves when addressing the needs for virtual connectivity and

interaction at Consolidated Baptist Church. In an effort to propose that this would be the case amongst this group, nothing was changed that would reflect anything outside of our normal weekly meetings as a ministry. Each participant was made aware that our time shared together would be documented in a way that could accurately capture and yield the necessary qualitative data for this research. To this end, there were no uncommon practices used to collect this data and execute these meetings, not to disrupt the organic communication that would come from this group and be used in the data that has been analyzed.

The way in which this data was collected is consistent with a focus group of twenty-five persons from Consolidated Baptist Church. All these individuals are active members of Consolidated Baptist Church and dedicated leaders of ministries within the church. It was important to include leaders who have a tenure of ministry experience and volunteerism at the church. These persons have consistently been involved in the changes that have happened across the decades of the church's existence. I likewise knew that these persons would not be leaving their areas of ministry by personal choice or mandatory rotation of leaders. In this group of twenty-five persons, they agreed to meet consistently for the training over six weeks, beginning April 4, 2022, to May 9, 2022.

In keeping with the nature of the research, this focus group was conducted via the Zoom platform which Consolidated Baptist Church has been consistently using since we decided to embrace virtual interaction on a regular basis. All participants were gathered, via Zoom, in the same virtual meeting room. The meeting days for this focus group were slated and executed on Monday evenings. The time for this focus group was 6:30 pm-7:30 pm each week. The meetings began and ended with prayer, and there were no breaks

in conversation once the meetings were started. Each participant was also able to stay for the duration of each weekly meeting.

Once the data was collected, the transcripts of this data were analyzed by first reading all the transcripts. The technology used to produce the transcripts of the meeting was Otter.ai. The audio from each recorded focus group meeting was uploaded into the Otter.ai platform and transcripts were generated from each upload. There were six sets of transcripts to analyze in total and those transcribed pages were no less than ten pages long. Those transcripts were printed and prepared for additional analysis. There were two separate sets of transcripts printed for analysis.

The data was also analyzed by identifying similarities and differences between the transcripts. This would consequently allow me to discover themes and the emerging types within this focus group. For this analysis, similarities were color coded according to what was present in one set of transcripts. To analyze the differences, the second set of printed transcripts were color coded for identification as well. These separate sets of transcript printing and coding were done as to not conflate information. Copying and pasting the transcript information was an option, but it also proposed the risk of mixing information that needed to remain separate for the most accurate data.

Zoom was the most viable option for this focus group because, as previously mentioned, the platform has already been in use prior to this focus group. It is also the platform that most of our leaders have used, not simply in the church space, but also in their private and professional spaces as well. Using a platform that each participant already had prior knowledge of created a very organic experience. It is also a platform that the church is currently in contract with for large group meetings of this type, and

these meetings were easily scheduled and started with the platform. Members did not have to create new accounts to use the platform and could log off to attend any other meetings in the same platform. Zoom was able to capture the audio and video of each focus group session in a clear manner that could be sent to another platform for transcription. Each session was recorded and archived so that it could be accessed later.

Otter.ai was the most viable platform for production of the transcripts from this focus group because it was able to provide the transcripts very precisely for the uploaded Zoom audio. After capturing the audio from each Zoom video and making it into a separate mp3 file, the audio was uploaded into Otter.ai. This program performed the transcription at a rate consistent with no mistakes in information. Its use is trusted at Consolidated Baptist Church as we have transcribed other audio such as sermons, Bible study lessons, and the like for ministry needs.

Implementation

The deliverables for this focus group came by way of initiating a pre-survey for all focus group participants of Consolidated Baptist Church. This opportunity had several benefits to the group and to the data collected. Providing a pre-survey first allowed me to ensure that all participants understood the details of their participation. The pre-survey made them familiar with the language and streams of thought that would be used as they went through the focus group sessions. It provided insight into what the participants may have already been thinking concerning being trained to train others. If participants were unfamiliar with the information used in the pre-survey, the focus group time may not have been as successful or beneficial as it was.

Once all the participants completed the pre-survey, it was then imperative to share with them the nature of these series of meetings. This was highlighted in Focus Group Session One. These meetings, first and foremost, had spiritual value. Understanding the need for these types of training that would help complete the work of ministry was imperative for sharing with the group. Being privy to the context of this group, I understood that this could not simply be a focus group done in spare time, but their time had to remain spiritual in nature. This was essential if I were going to have the full attention and commitment of the group.

It was important that these focus group sessions were carried out in a guided discussion style. This is consistent with the way most meetings are held at Consolidated Baptist Church. My goal was not to lecture each participant as to why they should embrace virtual-interactive platforms or to force them to make member volunteers interested in it. The goal of this time was to provide. with context, its use and equip them, with their permission, with the tools to teach others how to use virtual-interactive platforms, while at Consolidated Baptist Church. These guided discussions provided a level of open conversation that was conducive for acquiring the needed data from the group.

These meetings also possessed characteristics of an educational nature. The questions asked to the participants did not simply re-access spiritual perspectives, but the questions and discussions also provided me with the participants' level of knowledge and experience as I sought to train them to train others for this area of ministry. Their knowledge of the use of virtual platforms was willingly provided for the context of this

focus group. They were also open to new knowledge as it related to the use of platforms that provide virtual interaction.

Knowing that this work depended on the data of this focus group, I made all participants aware that the information they provided would be used in an academic setting. They were likewise made aware that each session would be reflective of normal meeting length conducted at Consolidated Baptist Church. They knew that the meetings would be an hour in length and would reoccur each week, for six weeks, on Monday evenings. All participants notified agreed to continue with the focus group and had no objections to content, time, or the day of the week. Finally, they knew that this information would go beyond the academic setting, they would be accompanied by a pre-survey, post-survey, and journal questions where the responses will be considered, and all information actually implemented at Consolidated Baptist Church. These focus group sessions were designed to have longevity beyond the six weeks of meetings with participants.

Ultimately, it was imperative to create an emphasis coming out of the isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic. There was discussion that detailed the importance of a shift that has already begun for the global church. We began by revisiting the shift that these leaders saw happening during the pandemic and if they noticed that these shifts were also happening even outside of Consolidated Baptist Church. This conversation led to the admission of virtual platform implementations in professional and social spaces for many members. Many participants described the various tools used to shift them to virtual interactions in those spaces.

Focus Group Session One also included a discussion on the use of virtual interaction opportunities at Consolidated Baptist Church. We implemented the use of virtual interaction platforms via Facebook Live, Instagram Live, YouTube, Roku, Zoom and the church's website. Participants were asked which of the platforms they were not only aware of but had also participated in by use of streaming for worship and other ministry opportunities. The use of these platforms came under the guise of "CBC: Unplugged." Participants were aware of the language of "CBC: Unplugged" and they made the association to the virtual platforms used for interaction.

Once participants were reminded of the shifts made by Consolidated Baptist Church to engage members and non-members alike, we began conversations on their use of virtual interactive platforms in their areas outside of church. Many of the members of this focus group work in professional environments and have access to various virtual interactive platforms that allow for interaction in their field. They were allowed to provide their own assessment of the virtual interactive platforms that they use in professional and social spaces. They were, likewise, questioned about the ease of use or the comfort they had with the virtual interactive platforms associated with their professional and social spaces.

Once participants identified the virtual interactive platforms used in their professional and social spaces, they were asked about their use of virtual interactive platforms while in worship with or in service to Consolidated Baptist Church. They were questioned concerning their frequency of use, comfortability in use, and foreseeable use. Participants were given time to share their opinions about the way in which virtual interactive platforms are used at Consolidated Baptist Church and using those tools in the

frequency that they are available has affected their discipleship and experience at Consolidated Baptist Church. The group was asked a variety of questions relative to virtual interactive platforms throughout this session.

Focus Group Session Two began with a recap of First Chronicles for those who may not have internalized the comments and analysis made on its relationship with shifts found in scripture and the shifts that the church must currently make. That recap and analysis was coupled with questions surrounding the shifts that each participant has already made when it comes to virtual platforms and interaction. This opened the door to extensive discussions on the shifts participants have made and they also asked me to share my experience with them.

I gave them insight on the most obvious shift and that was relative to Consolidated Baptist Church. We discussed how the shift to virtual interactive platforms was already in the process of happening, but how the Covid-19 pandemic escalated that need. I told them about my experience and having to shift expeditiously as it was important to the pastor and to the rest of the executive leadership that all members have access to worship and discipleship opportunities amidst the pandemic restrictions. The limitation placed on the number of those allowed to gather in one space and the frequency of those gatherings was all calculated in the shift that needed to be made.

This portion of the conversation was followed by their details that mostly involved how they were forced to shift at work. They too described the urgent and immediate shift to virtual interactive platforms that allowed for connectivity amongst the company and the clients in their respective places. Participants named the types of tools they used for those shifts. They also discussed the manner in which they were introduced

or reintroduced to each of those virtual interactive platforms. Participants eventually would share their experiences of the platforms and their familiarity of the platforms they used.

To end this session, I went back to introduce additional scriptures and biblical stories that created emphasis on shifts that happened in the Old Testament and New Testament alike. We began with discussing the shift that David had to make to successfully take the throne and become king of Israel. I also discussed with the group the shift the Sons of Issachar made to "understand the times they were operating in," and how this made for effective ministry in their time. Finally, we looked at the shift Noah had to make at the revelation of a coming flood that would destroy the entire earth. We considered what such an urgency to shift looked like for Noah and how others responded to such a directive from Noah. The group was asked a variety of questions relative to virtual interactive platforms throughout this session.

Focus Group Session Three began with assessing the relevance of 1 Chronicles 12:23-38 to today's need for the church to shift. As we considered this passage for a second time, participants were asked about evangelism on virtual interactive platforms. Understanding the reason Consolidated Baptist Church is committed to communicating the gospel to all, as directed by the Great Commission, the role of evangelism in the use of virtual interactive platforms was highlighted. Participants were asked how they had ever been evangelized or even disciples through such a platform prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants were also asked had they been evangelized and discipled via virtual interactive platforms after the heigh of the pandemic and the frequency of that evangelism or discipleship.

Focus Group Session Three ended with an elaborate discussion on the pivots and shifts made in the history of humanity and in America. The discussion began with the shifts in communications of valuables such as spirituals and how the way in which they were communicated and preserved shifted as the times shifted. The group even discussed the changes and shifts in technologies helped communicate all types of information. Participants were reminded of the shift from telegrams to phonographs, to disc players, to radio, to television, to CDs, to MP3's and more. The group even looked at how the distribution of preaching has evolved across platforms. The group was asked a variety of questions relative to virtual interactive platforms throughout this session.

Focus Group Session Four began with a biblical perspective on Christ's communication of the gospel. Very clear on the lack of today's technologies during the time of Christ, participants were asked to consider the various methods and shifts Christ took and made to communicate the gospel to the world. Discussion was generated as we all considered Christ's intentionality in preaching the gospel. Consideration was made for the parables that Jesus used to evangelize others. There was even attention given to Jesus' method of communication to write in the dirt in John 8:6-11. We likewise looked at the communication of the gospel through the way in which Christ lived.

With Christ as the example, we then considered how the evolution of the gospel was shared by the disciples. Participants discussed how the gospel was preached by the disciples. We also discussed the evolution of the communication of the gospel in the way it was preserved. We looked at how the Holy Spirit inspired the writings of scripture and how those writings were preserved for future generations to read and learn. Whether

those scriptures came in the forms of letters/epistles, the gospels, etc., emphasis was created to highlight the shifts made in the communication of the Gospel.

The group then took a more in-depth look at the Great Commission, and its meaning for the global church. The group considered what the mandate to "go ye therefore" means for sharing the gospel. It was also necessary for the group to consider what the Great Commission means for the local church of Consolidated Baptist Church. The group entertained questions that coupled the shift in the use of virtual interactive platforms and how those tools helped fulfill Consolidated Baptist Church's role in the Great Commission. With this in mind, we spent the last moments of this focus group session recounting the last more than half-century of communicating the gospel in American churches. Consideration was made for televangelists, radio evangelists, and now the communication of the gospel on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube to name a few virtual interactive platforms. The group was asked a variety of questions relative to virtual interactive platforms throughout this session.

Focus Group Session Five focused on the preferences of communication in a personal relationship or personal space. Participants were asked about the most effective mediums of communication that they needed to stay connected to their families, friends, and acquaintances. Discussions arose about the frequency of use each type of platform. Participants also discussed their levels of comfortability on the chosen platforms of communication. Inquiries were made as to how they were introduced to those virtual interactive platforms and how effective that introduction was to their use.

The group was then asked about their perspectives on communication and the church. These questions were not simply about Consolidated Baptist Church. The

questions initially began as inquiries that made room for discussion for communication regarding the global church. The conversation then shifted to the local church of Consolidated Baptist Church. Participants were asked how they felt concerning the communications specifically the shift in communications, made to accommodate the spontaneous change during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The group eventually inquired about several of the books used in the research of this project and they were provided with the names and authors of those books for their personal use. The group was asked a variety of questions relative to virtual interactive platforms throughout this session.

Focus Group Session Six was the final session of the series of focus groups at Consolidated Baptist Church. This final session addressed what the shift using virtual interactive platforms looked like for Consolidated Baptist Church. Participants were reminded of the goal to equip them to use the available platforms and then train others within the membership of Consolidated Baptist Church to do the same. Each participant was given the opportunity to informally provide a synopsis of their experience concerning the training and the necessity of such a training. They were given time to ask questions as to the next steps of Consolidated Baptist Church and the virtual interactive experience.

I closed this focus group session with a post-survey that was sent to the focus group participants. The post-survey for the focus group provided the insight as to how the focus group was presented to the participants. It also provided insighted on their level of interest in additional trainings and times of equipping as it related to virtual interactive

platforms. The survey also provided a chance to see what went well and what went poorly in the focus group sessions. This was the end of the focus group sessions.

Summary of Learning

The following information is the summation of data collected from the six-weeks focus group sessions at Consolidated Baptist Church via a series of questions provided via journal responses and pre- and post-session surveys. Some participants provided more than one answer in a response which has generated higher response numbers than the number of respondents. No answer options were provided. Participants were asked to freely provide their answers and those answers were grouped according to the content of the answer in the context of the provided questions.

Pre-Session Survey Reponses

1. How do you define virtual interaction?

    - 13/22 participants responded that virtual interaction means connecting with others.

    - 2/22 participants responded that virtual interaction means committing to engaging with others.

    - 6/22 participants responded that virtual interaction means interacting with others online.

2. In what ways can someone virtually interact with someone else?

    - 7/22 participants responded that they virtually interact with others by actively sharing links to platforms of virtual connectivity.

- 7/22 participants responded that they virtually interact with others by having access to and engaging in virtual connectivity platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Social Media, and other streaming services.

- 8/22 participants responded that they virtually interact with others by using specific devices to virtually connect with others such as smart phones, computers, televisions, radios, conference calls, and smart tablets.

3. What is your understanding of the Internet?

- 6/22 participants responded that the Internet is a placed designed to help you connect with others.

- 3/22 participants responded that their understanding of the internet is very basic and limited.

- 12/22 participants responded that the Internet is a tool for communication.

- 1/22 participants responded that the Internet is a military system.

4. What it does when we say, "live streaming?" (What does it mean when we say, "live streaming?"

- 19/22 participants responded that "live streaming" means they are seeing what is being displayed live and in real time.

- 1/22 participants responded that "live streaming" means they are seeing what is virtual and in real time.

- 1/22 participants responded that "live streaming" means that what is being displayed is accessible.

- 2/22 participants responded that "live streaming" means you are participating online.

5. How often do you connect to the church's livestream? (How often do you connect to Consolidated Baptist Church's livestream?)

- *How often do you connect to the church's livestream?*

How often do you connect to the church's livestream?
22 responses
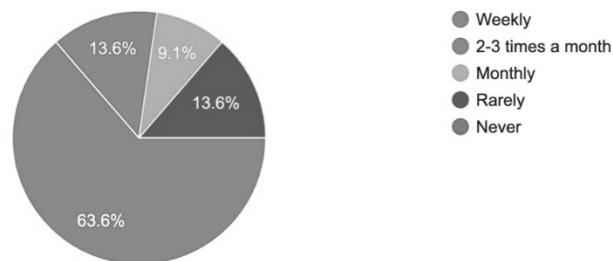
-
  o Weekly: 14 – 2-3 times a month: 3 – Monthly: 2 – Rarely: 3

Figure 1. Pre-survey frequency of connection to church's livestream

6. If you said monthly, rarely, or never, what are some of the reasons why you don't or don't more often? (If you said monthly, rarely, or never, what are some of the reasons why you do or don't more often?)

- 3/10 participants responded that this question was not applicable.

- 1/10 participants responded that they do not have internet access.

- 1/10 participants responded that they have not because of the frequency of travel.

- 4/10 participants responded that they have not because they travel quite often.

- 1/10 participants responded that they have not because they no longer like the style of worship.

7. If you said weekly or 2-3 times a month, what are some of the things that attract you to the virtual ministries of Consolidated Baptist Church?

- 1/22 participants responded that they love the connectedness to the Consolidated Baptist Church family.

- 1/22 participants responded that they love the Christ-centered ministry approach at Consolidated Baptist Church.

- 20/22 participants responded that they love the convenience.

Session One Focus Group Journal Responses

1. What are some of the ways that you can deepen your personal online identity?

    - 8/15 participants responded that they could increase their presence on virtual platforms.

    - 2/15 participants responded that they were unsure of what they could do.

    - 1/15 participants responded that they could create a personal website.

    - 2/15 participants responded that they would begin online networking

    - 2/15 participants responded that they would need to better understand technology.

    - 1/15 participants responded that they would need more privacy and protection online.

2. How does the Internet impact your personal life? Has it changed during the pandemic?

    - 5/15 participants responded that it has negatively impacted their personal lives.

    - 13/15 participants responded that it impacted their professional lives and therefore their personal lives.

    - 5/15 participants responded that it has had a positive impact on their personal lives.

Session Two Focus Group Journal Responses

1. Based on the model of 1 Chronicles 12, what are some of the ways that churches today can better "understand the times?"

    - 12/15 participants responded that churches should follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

    - 3/15 participants responded that churches should embrace virtual worship via updated technology.

    - 1/15 participants responded that churches should listen to the Holy Spirit and not be technologically dependent.

    - 1/15 participants responded that church should engage in succession planning.

2. In what ways can you shift your thinking over the next 7 days to adapt with the shifting times?

    - 2/15 participants responded that would make up their minds to be diligent in viewing worship opportunities virtually when they are not in-person.

    - 7/15 participants responded that they would seek God's guidance for the desire to embrace the change in the times.

    - 1/15 participants responded that they would be willing to pay more attention younger generations for understanding.

    - 2/15 participants responded that they would seek out resources such as literature to help prepare them

    - 1/15 participants responded that they would embrace more types of virtual platforms.

- 1/15 participants responded that they would embrace the shift even though it seems hard to do.

- 1 participant had no response.

Session Three Focus Group Journal Responses

1. In what ways has innovation played a role in technological involvement through history?

   - 10/15 participants responded that invocation has been the thing to advance technology.

   - 3/15 participants responded that innovation has encouraged imagination for technological involvement.

   - 1/15 participants responded that innovation has played a negative role in technological involvement. They prefer a more traditional lens.

   - 1/15 participants had no response.

2. Name 2-3 ways that you believe that Consolidated Baptist Church can better pivot as a result of technological advancements. (These answers are ranked by the highest suggestion to the lowest amongst participants.)

   - The highest response amongst participants is that Consolidated Baptist Church can better pivot with more quality technology and more frequent use of technology.

   - The second highest response amongst participants is that Consolidated Baptist Church can better pivot by using more social platforms outside of Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter.

- The third highest response amongst participants is that Consolidated Baptist Church can better pivot by engaging and in more frequent communication.

- The lowest response amongst participants is that Consolidated Baptist Church can better pivot by engaging the children of Consolidated Baptist Church.

Session Four Focus Group Journal Responses

1. What would you say your primary communication style is? Why?

    - 4/11 participants responded that their primary communication style is face-to-face in-person conversation because they wish to be in the presence of the person as they are speaking to them.

    - 2/11 participants responded that their primary communication style is text message because they do not always want to verbally communicate.

    - 2/11 participants responded that their primary communication style is written because they do not depend on text message but love the art of writing.

    - 1/11 participants responded that their primary communication style is "passive."

    - 2/11 participants responded that their primary communication style is "assertive."

    - 4/11 participants had no response.

2. How does communication directly impact your relationship with God and the local church? Has it evolved over time? If so, how?

- 5/11 participants responded that communications through reading and studying the word of God have directly impacted their relationship with God and the local church. They have suggested a greater level of maturity and understanding of God has evolved as a result of the impact.

- 5/11 participants responded that communications through prayer have directly impacted their relationship with God and the local church. They have suggested a greater level of maturity and understanding of God has evolved as a result of the impact.

- 1/11 participants responded that communication has a positive impact on their relationship with God.

- 1/11 participants responded that communication has impacted their relationship with God as it has made them feel loved and valued.

- 4/11 participants had no response.

Session Five Focus Group Journal Responses

1. In what ways would a small group deepened (deepen) interpersonal interaction for you?

   - 2/12 participants responded that a small group would allow them to feel heard in the midst of others.

   - 3/12 participants responded that a small group would provide them with a safe space and a trusting space to interact with others.

   - 9/12 participants responded that a small group would provide them with a sense of community as they interact with others.

- 4/12 participants responded that a small group with provide them with the comfort of an intimate and consistently closed group of people with which to interact.

2. What are some of the obstacles that would prevent you from being part of a small group on a consistent basis?

- 2/12 participants responded that there are no obstacles preventing them from being a part of a small group on a consistent basis.

- 7/12 participants responded that scheduling is what would prevent them from being a part of a small group on a consistent basis.

- 6/12 participants responded that the size of the group would prevent them from being a part of a small group on a consistent basis.

- 1/12 participants responded that a lack of direction for the group would prevent them from being a part of a small group on a consistent basis.

- 1/12 participants responded difficulties with using technology would prevent them from being a part of a small group on a consistent basis.

- 1/12 participants responded that political views would prevent them from being a part of a small group on a consistent basis.

*There were no Focus Session Six Journal Questions or responses.

Post-Session Survey Reponses

1. How do you define virtual interaction?

- 11/14 participants responded that virtual interaction is online engagement with others.

- 3/14 participants responded that virtual interaction is the use of digital technology.

2. In what ways can someone virtually interact with someone else?

   - 6/14 participants responded that virtual interaction happens via smart phones, computers, smart tablets, and similar devices.

   - 9/14 participants responded that virtual interaction happens through online apps and programs such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Zoom, and the like.

3. What is your understanding of the Internet?

   - 4/14 participants responded that the Internet is a place to communicate, share and access information.

   - 9/14 participants responded that the Internet is a place for global connections via the World Wide Web.

   - 1/14 participants responded that their understanding of the Internet was limited.

4. What it does when we say, "live streaming?" (What does it mean when we say, "live streaming?"

   - 14/14 participants responded that "live streaming" is a digital connection to a live event.

   - 1/14 participants responded that "live streaming" is a digital connection to a live event with interaction.

5. How often do you connect to the church's live stream? (How often do you connect to Consolidated Baptist Church's live stream?)

How often do you connect to the church's livestream?
14 responses

Legend:
● Weekly
● 2-3 times a month
● Monthly
● Rarely
● Never

21.4%

71.4%
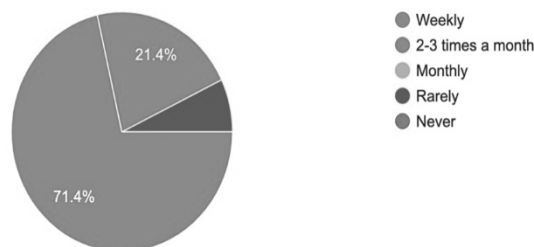
-
Weekly: 10 – 2-3 times a month: 3 – Monthly: 0 – Rarely: 1 – Never: 0

Figure 2. Post-survey frequency of connection to church's livestream

6. If you said monthly, rarely, or never, what are some of the reasons why you don't or don't more often? (If you said monthly, rarely, or never, what are some of the reasons why you do or don't more often?)

   - 1/3 participants responded that the question was not applicable.

   - 2/3 participants responded that they have scheduling conflicts.

7. If you said weekly or two to three times a month, what are some of the things that attract you to the virtual ministries of Consolidated Baptist Church?

   - 9/14 participants responded that it is the convenience of worship options.

   - 2/14 participants responded that it is the quality of streaming connection.

   - 1/14 participants responded that it is the relevance of content.

   - 1/14 participants responded that they believe in church doctrine.

   - 1/14 participants responded that the love the virtual interaction.

8. Please share any final reflections you have after journeying through this focus group. Do you feel like you're more knowledgeable on virtual ministry as a whole?

   - 1/14 participants responded that they did not feel more knowledgeable on

     virtual ministry as a whole after journey through this focus group.

- 13/14 participants responded that they did feel more knowledgeable on virtual ministry as a whole after journey through this focus group.

9. If so, what do you feel that you learned that could aid you in assisting others in a similar setting?

   - 1/14 participants responded that they learned to embrace the changes of the times to aid them in assisting others in a similar setting.

   - 4/14 participants responded that they are equipped to encourage others to embrace the changes of the times to aid them in assisting others in a similar setting.

   - 1/14 participants responded that they possess a new level of comfort to aid them in assisting others in a similar setting.

   - 5/14 participants responded that are open to more learning and discussion on the topic to aid them in assisting others in a similar setting.

   - 1/14 participants responded that they learned to accept that things will most likely not return to what they once were and they are open to continue to learn, from a distance, to aid them in assisting others in a similar setting.

Conclusion

The focus group used for this work can be considered an overall success with a few nuances to give attention. To begin, the strong areas of the implementation of this focus group includes the discussion driven facilitation. It was imperative that each participant felt comfortable enough to provide their opinions and perspectives to generate the data that exists from the focus group. A lecture style focus group would not have

worked for this focus group. It is clear that they have a valued perspective on the topic of virtual interaction opportunities at Consolidated Baptist Church.

Because of the discussion style facilitation of the focus group, participants were not inundated with technological information all at once or really at all. The group appreciated that the focus group sessions were not simply a "dump" of information that they could not easily process. This includes the language of the sessions that was easy to identify, and those terms not readily understood were explained to each participant. This prevented an overload of information, and the group was given just enough information to keep them engaged until the next session.

It also helped to have a biblical foundation for the advocacy of virtual interactive platforms at Consolidated Baptist Church. Because this is a Bible-believing and studying community, it was important that scripture was the foundation for this focus group. It was helpful that they were able to see, in scripture, the need for such a pivot and how biblical pivots help to advance the testimony of God through Jesus Christ. I do not believe these participants would have been as engaged had this not been the foundation.

Finally, the style of responses allowed made a difference to each participant. Allowing participants of the focus group to provide open answers by not limiting their responses to multiple choice was appreciated by the focus group in its entirety. The short-answer approach to answering the questions provided to the focus group was likewise helpful to get the most accurate data needed for this study. Short answers were simply grouped by similar themes identifying key words and phrases that existed amongst them.

As it relates to the data that was acquired, this focus group from Consolidated Baptist Church was first effective in the way that it provided the group, overall, with a

better understanding what virtual interactions look like at Consolidated Baptist Church. After examining the data in the pre-survey and the post-survey, the knowledge of what virtual interactions at Consolidated Baptist Church seemed to be consistent with the group's internalization of information provided to them. It was certainly imperative for the group to understand the biblical importance of pivots in the history of mankind and in the life of the church. It was also necessary for the focus group to understand the importance of those pivots at Consolidated Baptist Church.

Secondly, participants of this focus group loved the convenience of virtual interactive opportunities at Consolidated Baptist Church. I did notice a greater appreciation for virtual interactive platforms when each participant understood its value to the worship opportunities at Consolidated Baptist Church. There were some online platforms for virtual interaction that they were already familiar with. They had a greater level of comfort in conversation when they realized that the online platforms that they currently use are still useful for the virtual interactive opportunities at Consolidated Baptist Church. They did not feel pressure to learn new platforms and were even open to learning about and using additional platforms in additions to the ones already identified and used by Consolidated Baptist Church's leadership.

What was not surprising but raised a level of concern was the distrust that exists when it comes to virtual interactive opportunities. It was evident that there are concerns for protection and privacy on these online platforms that create virtual interactive opportunities. This distrust is a combination of the unknown and poor past experiences. It also exists because of the testimony of others, within the individual participants' peer group, shared with the participants. It will be important to create a sense of trust between

the platforms and the participants of this focus group. I am hopeful that this can come with more exposure to those platforms.

It was encouraging that the focus group as a whole is willing to embrace new technology and online platforms that will allow them to participate in virtual interactive opportunities for worship at Consolidated Baptist Church. The participants of the focus group, many of them, seemed to approach the opportunity with skepticism of what they would learn but decided to continue with the process of this study. Creating a space where they could be comfortable was intentional and necessary. The participants of this focus group did make it clear that they were willing to embrace more technology only with proper knowledge of the technology and online platforms.

One of the overall goals was not simply that the participants of this focus group would want to engage in virtual interactive opportunities, but that they would be equipped and feel comfortable to train others. Because of the structure and content of the focus group, many felt comfortable with the opportunity to share what they learned with others in the congregation of Consolidated Baptist Church. They also felt empowered to encourage others to take advantage of virtual interactive platforms. This is not to say that participants of the focus group seek to abandon in-person experiences. As a matter of fact, though the group as a whole appreciated the convenience of virtual interactive opportunities, they mostly found the opportunities un-useful for them when they attended worship in-person.

Finally, as each participant recounted the professional benefits of virtual interactive opportunities, it gave them reason to be open to them at Consolidated Baptist Church as well. Because they are already familiar with some of the online platforms used

for virtual interactive opportunities at Consolidated Baptist Church, it simply makes sense to many of them to engage in the same in a religious setting. Because they see how they benefited from the same at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, they were open to the benefits that they could see in the worship space.

I did find that the wording of the survey questions was important to keeping participants engaged in the questioning of the focus group. I would make corrections to how I chose to word various questions in this focus group when executed again. Having clear and concise language that did not need to be explained to the participants of this focus group is essential. Where the opportunity presents itself in the future for Consolidated Baptist Church, this will be a priority.

I, likewise, would adjust the timing of the focus group. The time frame of each session was perfect for participants. The group met for an hour time span, and it seemed to be just enough. What I would alter is the length of the focus group process. Although the group seemed to enjoy the six weeks, I do realize the focus group could have been just as effective if diminished by one week. Participants were already acutely aware of the time available to them each week and being reasonable about the length of the focus group would be helpful to the group.

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